

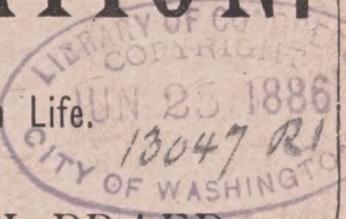
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A Novel of Australian Life.



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THE HEAD STATION.

CHAPTER I.

A BUSH FAMILY.

THERE could be no pleasanter place in which to dream away the hours of a hot December afternoon than the veranda of Doondi Head-Station, on the Eura River, in the colony of Leichardt's Land, Australia.

This veranda was very broad, and extended round three sides of the one-storied bungalow-like house. The bark roof slanted downward, and projected its ragged edge beyond the log-posts, which were festooned with climbing-plants, peculiar to a sub-tropical climate—the orange begonia, the Cape jasmine, the delicate white-flowered rinka-sporum—while one side was completely covered in by a large-leaved vine of the Isabella grape, which temptingly displayed its purpling fruit.

There were a great many French windows leading from the house on to the veranda. Through these might be caught glimpses of low rooms, cedar-lined, canvas-ceiled, with rugs and skins spread upon the white boards; in the center one, a piano, chintz-covered chairs and couches, and a litter of books and work; in another, the spotless drapery and white daintinesses of a woman's bed-chamber, left open to the general gaze, with that careless simplicity which is the charm of an Australian household.

From the slab walls, branching stag-horn ferns stretched out their green antlers; mossy baskets hung from the rafters; here and there were ranged stands of calladiums and such exotic plants as require shade and damp. Squatters' chairs and canvas-covered lounges seemed to invite the indolent and weary; a sewing-machine stood in the coolest corner with a large basket of work by its side. Books, newspapers, and children's toys were scattered about in de-

lightful confusion; a water-melon cut in half, and a dish of figs and guavas, were waiting to be eaten. It was very evident that the veranda was more lived in than the sitting-room. Here lay a knife of the kind which bushmen love, there a stray saddle-strap, and a dirty cabbage-tree hat. A loosely coiled stock-whip looked at first sight like a big brown snake basking upon the boards. Two kangaroo-hounds blinked and yapped at the bees which flitted from one deep-scented flower to its neighbor, and at the yellow mason-flies seeking their mud nests in the eaves.

Through the leaf-framed arches might be seen views of wild, uninhabited country. A vine-trellised garden sloped gently down to a scantily timbered plain, where clumps of eucalyptus afforded meager shade to groups of browsing cattle, and where gaunt trunks of trees, which had been "rung" and allowed to die slowly, stood like white skeletons waiting to be felled and burned.

In the middle distance lay undulating tracts of pasture and forest, gray-green in tint, with here and there a patch of scrub or dark line of creek or gully. Beyond, were mountains invading the south-eastern horizon—an irregular chain forming the boundary between two colonies—jagged bowlders, peaks, hump like hills, covered at the base with dense jungle and eucalyptus forests, the summits rock-bound and weather-scarred. Here stood Mount Comongin with its rampart of granite, and the curious depression on its crown, said by geologists to be the crater of an extinct volcano, but where, according to the blacks' tradition, there dwelt in a lake that was fathomless the great Bunyip, father of all the minor Bunyips, that haunted lagoons and water-holes. From the Doondi veranda, Comongin was an important feature in the landscape. Standing in the foreground, every crag distinct, every fissure traceable, the sentinel-like gum-trees showing white lines against the dull background, Comongin held his own among his more lofty brethren. To the right, there was Knapp's Cliff, the half of a pyramid cleft in twain, its naked side, straight as a razor, gleaming in the sun. Then came a gap in the jagged outlines of more distant mountains, filled in by a blue sea of billowy hills, which spread to the horizon. Nearer, the twin peaks of Mount Tieryboo raised their virgin spires, which, within record, had never been scaled by either white man or aboriginal. And away to the left,

another crag, a mighty citadel of Nature, bastions, towers, fortifications, all complete to the eye of Fancy, reared upon a gigantic wall of rock, in which were caves that might be the abode of giants, and clefts that seemed to lead into the very bowels of the earth.

It was a wild region. Here, in these fastnesses, rose the Eura River, which, after passing through Doondi, Gundalunda, and many other cattle-stations, swept downward through the southern corner of Leichardt's Land to the ocean. Here also lay the sources of the Doonbah. This stream flowed in another direction, thundering down the rocks, threading the Wild Man's Gorge, watering Captain Clephane's station, Tieryboo, and joining a greater river in New South Wales.

There was a dreamy stillness in the air verging upon oppression. Though afternoon had begun to wane, the heat was too intense for bird or insect to be noisy. A white haze clung to the hills telling of distant bush-fires. The wind was scorching, and the parched lawn and sun-baked walks seemed to be yearning for moisture. The more tender flowers drooped their heads, while flaming tiger-lilies, red hibiscus, and crimson verbenas flaunted their glaring colors aggressively. It was a relief to turn the eyes from a pomegranate-tree in full bloom to a well-watered and shaded rockery, where scrub-plants flourished, and maidenhair fern grew luxuriantly.

On this side of the house, a flight of log-steps led to a grove of orange-trees, under which the ground was strewn by a rain of fallen petals. This was apparently a favorite resort. Beneath the perfumy branches a hammock was slung, and here was a lady seated at work, with a baby sleeping in her lap, and two children, a girl of seven and a boy of five, playing by her side.

The lady was Mrs. Clephane, the second daughter of Duncan Reay, owner of Doondi. She was married to a neighboring squatter, and with her children was now on a visit to her father. She was a placid, fair-faced woman of thirty, handsome, after the Scotch type, with a straight rather thick nose; prominent cheek-bones, benevolent lips, which receded, showing the gums, and full dark-lashed eyes.

She was stitching at a child's frock, but every now and then would pause and look out into vacancy with her soft

violet eyes. Her eyes belied her character and the rest of her face. They suggested a romantic turn of mind, whereas she was only thinking, "I wonder whether there will be a mob of fat cattle ready for the butcher next month, for we shall want some extra comforts for Jack's niece—English people are so particular;" or, "I do wish that father would take up with politics again, and get into the Ministry. It would be so nice to have a few weeks at Leichardt's Town, especially now that there is going to be a new governor;" or, "Unless the drays come soon we shall not be able to make any mincemeat for Christmas," etc. Mrs. Clephane was perhaps a trifle uninteresting, but she was admirably adapted to her position as the wife of an ex-hussar, now a squatter, who presumably required a certain amount of common sense in his helpmate.

The boy was like his mother in face, and probably in temperament, to judge by the contented manner in which he pursued a somewhat monotonous occupation. He was scooping up the earth with his dimpled hands and a tin pannikin, and rearing a series of hillocks along the pathway, a proceeding which discomfited a tribe of wandering ants, and excited the remonstrances of his more enterprising sister.

She was an elf-like creature with solemn dark eyes, a mop of short black hair, and skinny arms and shoulders, which were perpetually poking themselves out of her low-necked brown-holland blouse.

"Barty, I want to play. Get up, Barty. Let us play at 'magineing something."

"I'se playing," stolidly answered Barty.

"Barty, are you making graves?"

"No," said Barty; "I'se making dampers."

"But, Barty, me and you will play at burying. We'll try to find a mantis to say the prayers. Barty," clasping her little hands in excitement, "it's bootiful to play at graves. Let us bury Moses."

Barty suspended his operations with the pannikin. "Oo hasn't got Moses, Jinks; God deaded him. Don't want to play at Moses."

"He was took to the top of a high mountain," said Jinks, reflectively. "I just 'spect it was Mount Comongin, for nobody never goes there except the blacks when its bunya-time. Barty, let us 'magine the blacks are the chil-

dren of Israel, and they brought him down, and we went to the camp and fetched him out. Barty," she added, reflectively, for the suggestion did not appear to stimulate Barty's prosaic fancy, "if this was Moses's grave, shouldn't you like to see him come out and go into another?" in an awe-struck whisper, "He'd have wings, Barty."

"Don't want to," steadily repeated Barty. "Go away, Jinks. Oo is a bad girl. Oo's trod on my dampers."

"I wish there was some grown-up people here to play with me," said Jinks, with dignity. "Children is so tiresome. I think you must be cutting a tooth, Barty, you're so scotty." After this scathing remark, Jinks turned to her mother: "Mamma, when is grandfather coming home?"

"I don't know to a day, Jinks," placidly replied Mrs. Clephane.

"Mamma, when are we going back to Tieryboo?"

"Gracious! how can I tell, child? When the mustering is done, and the drays have come up, and when we've got a new cook."

"Can't father's niece cook?"

"That's certain she can't, Jinks."

"But why? You and Aunt Hester can. And Aunt Gretta makes the butter."

"Well, England is different from Australia," said Mrs. Clephane, smoothing the gusset she was stitching. "There are plenty of servants to do things, and Isabel Gauntlett—that's father's niece—has been used to grand ways. Just you remember that, Jinks, and keep quiet and don't mess about, or else she'll go back again."

"She wants a lot of people to bring her here," said Jinks, contemptuously. "There's father and grandfather and Combo and Billy. I expect she's got a lot of things. New chums always have a big pack. Is she going to stop at Gundalunda with Aunt Judith and Mr. Ferguson?"

"She'll stop there while grandfather goes over to Nash's for the cattle," said Mrs. Clephane. "Now don't bother, child; you're always asking foolish questions."

"Some things is true and some things isn't," said Jinks, oracularly, "and little girls must ask to be told."

"Where's England?" inquired Barty, roused by Jinks's statement to a sense of his own deficiencies.

"Dunce!" cried Jinks, with scorn. "Miss Barham showed it to you on the map. It's where father lived when

he was a little boy; and it's all on the Christmas cards. Red berries grow out of the plum-puddings, and the grass is covered with a white table-cloth."

"Snow, Jinks," amended her mother. "Snow is soft like cotton-wool, and it melts like ice."

"If it is like wool it isn't ice," argued Jinks. "Did you ever see snow, mother?"

"No," admitted Mrs. Clephane. "I am a Leichardt's Land native—like you."

"Nor Aunt Gretta, nor Maafu, nor Uncle Sib, nor nobody else has ever seen snow except father, and he does sometimes tell crackers," continued Jinks, weighing the question of evidence. "Cockamaroo is a cracker. If he did live on Comongin, and had his dinner off stewed children, he'd have eaten up all the piccaninnies; and there are lots in the blacks' camp. Perhaps snow is gammon; Uncle Sib says Christmas cards are gammon. I wish Isabel Gauntlett would put some snow in an envelope and send it to me to look at. I'd like to see England. When Patrick Desmond asks me again to marry him I'll tell him yes if he'll promise to take me to England. That's what Aunt Gretta answers. Mother," added Jinks, suddenly, "Red Dick, from Gundalunda, says that Mr. Ferguson is courting Aunt Gretta. And when they are engaged will she get like Miss Barham and say everything is 'so sweet'?"

Jinks threw herself into a mincing attitude, and was sternly reproved for mimicking her governess, and for listening to the stockmen's talk. Whereupon she moved loftily away, and began to interrogate a Kanaka boy who was digging a few paces off.

"Maafu," said Jinks, "do you ever go courting?"

The Kanaka paused in his work and turned upon the child a puzzled black face, round which the crisp wooly hair, artificially lightened by the use of lime-wash, stood out like a dull aureole. Then he laughed with the fatuous chuckle of the South Sea Islander, which differs considerably from the impish merriment of the aboriginal, and resumed his digging.

"I dare say," observed Jinks, condescendingly, "that you have a different word for it in your language. What do you call the place you come from, Maafu?"

"Tanna Island, Missee Jinks."

"And did you like leaving your home, Maafu? Or did

they kidnap you like the man in Mr. Desmond's song?" And Jinks rolled out in unmelodious falsetto, with a fair attempt at a brogue,

" Set every stitch of canvas,
To woo the freshening wind,
Our bowsprit points to Cuba,
The coast lies far behind;
Filled to the hatches full, my boys,
Across the sea we go.
There's twice five hundred niggers
In the stifling hold below."

" My word, Miss Jinks, dat lubly," said Maafu, admiringly.

" No, Maafu, it isn't lovely," replied Jinks, impelled to candor by the consciousness of superior knowledge. " I am afraid you are not a judge of music. My father says the only song I can sing is ' the tune the old cow died of;' and that means something nasty. Tell me, Maafu, why did you leave your island? Weren't you afraid of being beaten and of having a master, like Legree, you know? But perhaps you have never read ' Uncle Tom's Cabin,' Maafu?"

The Kanaka shook his head incomprehendingly.

" It's a nice story," said Jinks. " I think we might play at Eva and Uncle Tom—you and me. You're black, and I'm—no, Eva was a good girl, and Jinks is most always naughty. Jinks takes a lot of whopping. The devil gets inside of her," here Jinks tragically struck her breast—" and he'd never go out unless he was whopped. It's an awful pity, Maafu. Did you come in a ship from Tanna?"

" Big ship, Missee Jinks, sailors white, all the rest Tanna and Leefoo men," replied Maafu, becoming animated. " White captain say, ' You come to Leichardt's Land and work, one, two, three year; then you come back again—massa give you clothes—give you money—you buy tools—you build good house—make your wife like white woman. Missionary—he say ' go. ' "

" Oh, you've got a wife, Maafu!" interrupted Jinks, deeply interested. " Does she wear a wedding-ring like mother and Aunt Hester?"

The question seemed a serious difficulty to Maafu. He sighed, hung his head, and let his spade drop. " Missee Jinks," he said, " every white missees wear ring. My

wife, she not have ring—no ring—no good marry. In one year Maafu's time up, and he go back to Tanna. Massa Reay, he very kind to Maafu. He lub Missee Jinks. You ask Massa Reay to give Maafu wedding-ring, so that he make his wife real missus, like white woman?"

Jinks reflected, then nodded approvingly, the idea commanding itself to her sense of propriety. "That's very right of you, Maafu; I'll ask grandfather. And you mustn't ever be scotty with your wife, or hit her over the head with a nulla-nulla, like Combo. But, as you're married, you can't ask any one else. I don't think girls would want to marry you," continued Jinks, impartially, as she surveyed the Kanaka from head to toe, "though a white woman did marry Jack Nutty, our black stockman at Tieryboo; and I'd rather marry you than Combo, Maafu. However, there's no use in thinking of it, for you mustn't even court. You're like Aunt Hester."

"Mrs. Murgatroyd?" asked Maafu, thoughtfully, not at once perceiving the aptness of the comparison.

"She has got a husband, you know, Maafu, only nobody will say where he is. I heard Red Dick telling Mrs. Baynes that it was of no use for people to come courting Aunt Hester, for that she was worse than married already."

"Jinks!" Mrs. Clephane called sharply from under the orange-trees. "Come here. What is that you are saying?"

"Maafu wants to see the baby, mother," promptly replied Jinks. She was well aware that it was treason to talk to the servants of her Aunt Hester, who had married unhappily, and was separated from a bad husband. "Come, Maafu."

Maafu grinned delightedly; and, led by Jinks, stepped modestly toward the white bundle lying on Mrs. Clephane's lap. He stared at it with tender, round, black eyes for a minute, then said, solemnly, "Dat child a very nice baby, missus," and went back to his digging.

The Kanaka reverences women and adores children. He is loyal in heart, affectionate of disposition and domestic in his habits. He has implicit faith in the master who is kind to him, though his soul will rise in passionate revolt against ill-treatment or betrayal of confidence.

The native black, on the other hand, knows that honor and fair dealing, like clean nails, are among the absurd

peculiarities of the gentleman; and draws a sharp line between the squatter who keeps his word and cleans his nails and the bullock-driver who does neither. But he has no real appreciation of the virtues in point, and does not resent their absence. Far less culpable would it be to meet a black's guile with treachery, or to cheat a wide-awake white man, than to abuse the child-like confidence of the Kanaka. Praise and sympathy are life to him. Harshness stupefies, and, if carried to excess, kills him, for the Kanaka has no great vitality, and dies when life seems no longer a thing to be desired.

CHAPTER II.

HESTER MURGATROYD.

JINKS received a lecture. She was told that little girls had no business to talk of their elders, and was for the hundredth time forbidden to go into the kitchen during the visits of Red Dick or of any other stockman in the district.

"But, mother, it was in the dairy, not the kitchen. Mrs. Baynes was skimming the cream because Aunt Gretta had gone for a ride; and Uncle Jo sent me for some thick milk to feed his sick calf. And Red Dick did say that it'd be a good thing for Aunt Hester if she could find out for certain that her husband was dead. Where is he, mother?"

"Go away, child. I've no patience with your curiosity," said Mrs. Clephane, glancing uneasily toward a corner of the veranda where her sister, Hester Murgatroyd, was sitting, in an odd but not ungraceful attitude, her knees drawn up to her chin, and upon them a book, over which she was poring. She looked completely absorbed; but some part of the conversation must have reached her, for she flung down the book with a sudden gesture of wrath, and rising to her feet came down the log-steps toward the little group under the orange-tree.

The incorrigible Jinks was saying, "I'll ask Aunt Hester; and, if he is dead, I'll just tell Red Dick so, and Aunt Hester may marry any one she likes."

"You will hold your tongue, Jinks; and, if Red Dick is ever again so impertinent as to talk of my concerns in your hearing, you will bid him mind his own business. I thought you were a kind-hearted child and a little lady. If you were

one or the other you would know that it is insulting to me to be spoken of in that way by the stockmen."

There was a passionate tremor in Mrs. Murgatroyd's voice. Jinks flushed crimson, and her black eyes dilated as she looked up at her aunt.

"Aunt Hester, I *am* a lady; and you shall just see. And, if I forget, you shall whop me."

A peculiar, long-drawn *Cooëe* sounded from behind the house. "That's Uncle Sib, I bet," cried Jinks; and darted away followed by Barty. Mrs. Clephane went on placidly with her needle-work.

Hester Murgatroyd made a few hurried steps down the gravel-path and back again. "Mollie," she cried, with a sort of fierce pathos, "how can you sit sewing there without a word, when you know I'm in such trouble that I can't rest?"

Mrs. Clephane laid down her needle, and gazed at her sister with puzzled eyes.

"I didn't think you minded, Hester—now."

"Now!" repeated Hester. "Don't you know that my husband," and her voice rang with scorn, "has been out of prison for ever so long? People will hear of it and there'll soon be some gossip for the men's huts. You don't suppose that I'm to be left in peace."

"He can't do anything," said Mrs. Clephane, weakly. "I asked Jack; you are quite safe. And he would never come to these parts. Is it about that you are troubled, Hester?"

Hester did not answer for a minute. A rush of blood dyed her face. "I can't sleep at night," she said, abruptly.

"You couldn't write—you couldn't make a play out of it, Hester?" suggested Mrs. Clephane. "Don't you remember how, at first, when you were sleepless you always got up and scribbled—I can see you now with your head down close to the paper—and how cross I used to get with you for waking me up and making me listen to your plays!"

"Oh, Mollie, don't go back to that."

"But, Hester, you were such a funny girl! I've always said you were a shingle short, you know—talking to yourself, crying and laughing over a book, and getting into a state over some impossible scheme, while you'd forget all about real things, and let your clothes go unmended, and the store empty, and the men short of rations. You have

been all up in the clouds again lately. I thought you had forgotten you were ever married. I didn't suppose you were worrying about anything but books and ideas. It's no use worrying Hester. He'll never bother you again. It's just a fit. You'll get over it, and take up a new set of ideas. You wouldn't have a turn at the sewing-machine? Or—what have you done with all the plays, Hester?"

"Burned them," laconically replied Hester. And she broke into a most melancholy and unmirthful laugh which roused the baby asleep upon her sister's knee.

Mrs. Clephane rose and rocked her matronly form to and fro, cradling the child against her breast. But the little thing's crying would not be stilled.

"Well, it is a bad job," said Mollie, regretfully, not referring to the baby, which she kissed with rapture, and apostrophized as a hungry "little ducksie," that had slept past its dinner-hour, and should be fed at once—that it should.

Then she went into the house with her infant, and Hester Murgatroyd remained alone under the orange-trees.

In Australia, a woman past thirty has lost the tender grace and the fairness of youth. This was the case with Hester Murgatroyd. She was thirty-two, and her girlhood was gone forever. She had never been beautiful; but she had been always, and was now, supremely interesting. "Indefinable charm" is a stock phrase, and one grows tired of its use, implying as it does so much, and expressing so little. Nevertheless, this indefinable charm is a very real possession, and Hester unconsciously rejoiced in it.

She was tall and rather angular, but she moved freely, and the spontaneity of her gestures gave them a sort of dignity. She was not careful of her appearance, and despised little arts of dress and the fashions and daintinesses in which most women take pleasure. But this contempt of detail harmonized with her bearing, and her limp muslin draperies fell naturally into becoming folds, while chestnut hair, with a ripple in it, needs no elaborate dressing when it adorns a head well set on.

Hester's eyes were brown, with irises so large that no white showed in the center between the upper and lower lids. They were slightly prominent, very dreamy, and had an expression of innocence and unconscious pathos rarely seen except in the eyes of an animal or a child. Her feat-

ures were irregular, the cheek-bones too high, the lips too thin, and the upper one too long; while her complexion, naturally fine and delicate, had the withered look produced by extreme paleness. Her smile, however, was full of suggestiveness, and her wistful eyes seemed to be telling a sorrowful story.

She stood for a minute or two quite motionless, with her hands tightly clasped before her, while she gazed out toward Mount Comongin. Steps sounding upon the veranda caused her to start and color. But the flush died away as she recognized in the new-comer her half-brother; and she nodded composedly, turning to ascend the steps.

"Oh, Sib! so it is you! I suppose that everything is right at the Selection?"

"How do you do, Hester? The fencers are short of rations. Pretty hot, isn't it? And this is your birthday."

"Yes, Sib. I am thirty-two to-day. Thank you for remembering it."

Mrs. Clephane appeared at one of the French windows without the baby. "Oh, Hester," she exclaimed, guiltily, "how stupid of me! I had forgotten. You should have reminded me."

"Why, Mollie? Why should any one think of my birthdays? I am getting old, I am thankful to say, and they are best passed over without remark."

Sib, or more properly, Sebastian Reay, flung himself into a squatter's chair, and mopped his face with a red silk pocket-handkerchief. Sebastian was not so good-looking as his sisters. He was a lean, stolid-faced youth, uncouth and gawky, with dog-like brown eyes, somewhat resembling Hester's in expression, a roughly trimmed beard and mustache, and legs and arms which seemed to belong rather to space in general than to his own body. He did not live at Doondi, but at a Selection, a few miles up the river. Sib eyed Mrs. Murgatroyd with a questioning canine sort of anxiety.

"Anything gone against the grain, Hester?" he asked.

Her lips quivered. She turned away her face, and answered with a forced laugh, "No, Sib; but it's too hot for any one to be cheerful."

Sib whistled sympathetically. He guessed that something was amiss, but did not inquire. He was a young man of few words, and jerked out his sentences with difficulty.

Just then there came dancing out of the sitting-room as bright and beautiful a girl as could well be seen in either old world or new. A slender figure in blue muslin, with a coquettish bib and apron and fluttering ribbons; hair which gave golden glints in the sunshine; gray Irish eyes clear as a baby's; a sweet mouth with a beseeching droop at the corners; a skin like the leaf of a tea-rose; and a voice, for she sung in snatches as she moved, fresh and tender as a bird's trill.

CHAPTER III.

GRETTA'S VIEWS.

THIS was Gretta, the youngest and only unmarried one of the daughters. It must be explained that Duncan Reay of Doondi had had two wives. His first had borne him Hester and Mollie; his second, an Irishwoman, had been the mother of Sebastian and Gretta. She was dead. Gretta was ten years younger than her half-sister Mrs. Clephane. She kissed the tips of her fingers to Sib, and began to pluck at a bunch of grapes.

"You're just too late to see father, Sib," said Mrs. Clephane. She was the only one of the sisters with any tendency to the Australian drawl. "He started for Gundalunda directly after lunch."

"Where's Jack Clephane?" asked Sib.

"Oh, hadn't you heard? Isabel Gauntlett's steamer was telegraphed, and Jack went to Leichardt's Town to meet her. She'll stop at Gundalunda for a day or two, and he'll go on with father to Nash's Station, and inspect that mob of cows."

"What do you think of that, Sib?" said Gretta. Her accent was decidedly Irish—the prettiest accent in the whole category, when producing a mere broadening of the vowels and melodious rounding of the words, as though, metaphorically, honey were dropping. It was curious to note how the family gave evidence of a mixed nationality.

"Your divinity is about to present herself in the flesh, and you need no longer confine yourself to adoring a photograph."

"Sib's divinity!" sharply echoed Mrs. Clephane.

"Oh, Mollie! So you never suspected Sib of cherishing

a secret passion? It is perfectly true, though. He persuaded your husband to give him an old photograph of Miss Gauntlet, and it hangs in his room over Billy the bull's pedigree, like an angel's image above a monumental inscription. By the way, how is Billy, Sib?"

"Died last night of pleuro," lugubriously announced Sib.

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Mrs. Clephane. "I am glad the Tieryboo cattle have been inoculated."

"There's a theme for Mr. Durnford's muse," heartlessly rejoined Gretta. "Our poet-tutor! But I don't fancy that his bent is toward the comic. He is like that wandering butcher who weighed fifteen stone, and who came all along the Eura during the drought searching for fat cattle, and finding none. Don't you remember him, Hester? His face was like a ripe prickly pear; and he was fond of reciting Hamlet's soliloquy. 'Tragedy, Miss Reay, tragedy is the figure for me.' " It might be remarked that Jinks and her aunt shared a fine faculty of mimicry. "Well," continued the young lady, "I suppose that inoculation will form the cheerful theme of conversation for some time to come."

"Anything been doing, Gretta?" asked Sib.

"Life couldn't be at a lower ebb," answered Gretta, emphatically. "Two suspicious-looking Free Selectors were seen prowling about the Main Camp yesterday, so we had all the station-maps out, ventilated the question of the Land Laws pretty freely, and held a council of war as to the expediency of doing a little 'dummying.' Oh, that the Reay energies would expend themselves upon something less depressing than cattle! There is not a spark of enterprise in the whole family. Think of living within thirty miles of a gold-field and not owning a claim. We have been dull as ditch-water. They are mustering at Gundalunda, so we have had no visitors this week."

Sib laughed. "Is that your grievance, Gretta?"

"No, indeed. I have a most melancholy piece of intelligence to communicate. It has been on my mind since eleven o'clock. We are going to lose our poet. Mr. Durnford has given notice. We must look out for another tutor."

"What?" asked Sib. "Has the old uncle at Toowoonan sent for him back again?"

"That is not likely," put in Mollie. "They had a regular quarrel."

"I don't wonder," said Gretta. "Fancy expecting a poet to manage a public-house."

"He wasn't a poet then," demurred Mollie.

"Well, imagine a gentleman serving out doctored grog to a set of diggers!"

"It was an hotel," corrected Mrs. Clephane. "Jack once set up a first-class accommodation-house," she added, as though this settled the question.

"On the principle that a depraved taste for rum might be corrected by sour beer," laughed Gretta. "That was one of your husband's moral speculations, Mollie; and it went smash like the pigs and the kangaroo-hides."

Mrs. Clephane looked a little ruffled. "At any rate," she said, "Mr. Durnford might have found it worth while to try and please his uncle. If he had shown that that wasn't his line, old Raikes would perhaps have given him some money to start for himself."

"My mother's sister hasn't demeaned herself by marrying an ex-publican," said Gretta, with spirit; "but if she had I should do as Mr. Durnford did—cut the connection, and 'up stick and yan,' as the blacks say."

Mrs. Murgatroyd, who had been snipping the withered blossoms from a pot of gloxinia, started at the beginning of the conversation, and turned, looking for an instant as though she would have spoken. Repressing the impulse, she stooped more closely over the stand of flowers and went on with her occupation.

"Hester," said Gretta, "haven't you seen Mr. Durnford since Bill Stone brought the mail?"

"No," replied Hester, in a stifled voice.

"Then you don't know. He hasn't consulted you—you, his Egeria."

The scissors dropped from Hester's hand. She faced her sister, her eyes gleaming, though her cheeks were paler than usual. "What do you mean?" she cried, passionately. "What right have you—what right have people to say such things?"

"Gracious!" said Gretta, opening her gray eyes wider.

"It's only a little chaff. What harm is there in comparing you with Egeria—or Aspasia—no, she wasn't proper—or any other intellectual young woman with a mission. You are always talking of Mr. Durnford's mission. Here's an opportunity for him. They want to make him sub-editor

to the 'Leichardt's Land Review.' The letter came this morning, and I heard him telling father about it. I shall owe Gustavus Blaize one for that," added Gretta, savagely. "It is he who has done it. He fancies himself a patron of literature. I know that he writes for the 'Review.' Well, he has robbed our household of its one male member whose interests are not distinctly bucolic. 'Soul can not march to the bleating of sheep or the lowing of cattle,' as saith another poet. What do you think about it, Hester?"

Mrs. Murgatroyd hesitated for a moment. "You shouldn't be sorry, Gretta," she said. "It will be a step to something better. He ought not to bury himself here. There are so few Australian writers. It is they who will shape the future of Australia."

"Oh!" sighed Gretta. "Don't you go and be joining in that cant about the future of Australia. It's such a cheap way of glorifying ourselves. We have no past to boast of, so we invent a future. I prefer a country with a history. Here it is all nature—nature. I should like a little art for a change. What have you got in your swag, Sib?"

Sebastian unstrapped a valise which he had brought with him, and threw on the floor a collection of books and periodicals, most of them in new bindings.

"Why, Sib," said Gretta, pouncing upon them, "you have been to Leichardt's Town. What are all these? Poetry. 'Browning's Dramatis Personæ.' 'The Light of Asia.'"

"That's for you, Hester. So you can give Durnford back his copy."

"Thank you," said Hester, faintly. She did not look Sib in the face, but moved a pace or two apart and turned over the pages of one of the volumes. Her eyes fell upon the opening stanzas of "Prospice;" and then, like a rush, all came over her, turning her giddy. The sunny veranda, the light talk, the cloud-flecked mountain, the scent of flowers, the crunching sound made by Maafu's spade as he turned up the dry soil—seemed the unrealities of a dream; and for the moment she was standing, the mist in her face, the fog in her throat, before her a bitter ordeal—not the meeting through death but the parting in life.

"'The Nineteenth Century,' 'The Australasian,' 'Is

Life worth Living,'" read Mrs. Clephane, continuing the list.

"Certainly not," interjected Gretta, "until a thunder-storm has cleared the air."

"It is coming," said Hester. She wanted to hear the sound of her own voice—to assure herself that she was not dreaming. "Look how the clouds are gathering round Mount Comongin."

"My dear Sib," said Gretta, "why this shower of modern literature! Is it with the view of raising us to Miss Gauntlett's intellectual level?"

"I thought," rejoined Sib, looking red and rather sheepish, "that she might miss what she has been accustomed to in England. She'll expect to find us all a set of Goths."

"Speak for yourself, Sib," retorted Gretta. "You forget that I have largely enjoyed the advantage of Mr. Gustavus Blaize's society—and quotations. I may be a barbarian, but I'm not a benighted one. Why," she added in a different tone, "I dare say that I have read more books than Miss Gauntlett herself—and think more of such things than she who has lived within reach of everything that is best in the world. I dream of music, and pictures, grand old churches, historic castles, beautiful women, and refined heroic men. Ah! we Australians are like birds shut up in a large cage; our lives are little and narrow, for all that our home is so big." Gretta's voice gained an odd intensity as she proceeded: "I want something more than great plains, trees, and mountains. I am tired of cattle, and horses, and books. Books don't satisfy. I want to fall down and worship—Sib, you know what I mean. You're always dreaming about England, I know you are—although you are so rough, and so very colonial, poor boy. Oh, dear me! we are not patriots, are we, Sib?"

Sib silently shook his head.

"I shall never marry any one," said Gretta, with energy, "who has not lived all his life in England."

"Then I'll tell Ferguson of Gundalunda not to ride here courting," cried one of two school-boys, lean, long-legged, and indeterminate of feature, who had come through the sitting-room to the veranda just in time to catch the end of Gretta's harangue. "You had better think twice over 'Old Gold.'"

"He is at any rate a relic of the past," observed Gretta.

“ ‘ Dyspepsy would a-wooing go,
Whether his love would have it or no,’ ”

cried the second school-boy. “ Mr. Gustavus Blaize rode over from Wyeroo on purpose to propose, Sib. You never saw such a guy as ‘ Old Gold ’ turned out. He might have been set up in the Cultivation Paddock for a scarecrow to frighten the cockatoos. I say, girls, what is the thermometer down here? 102° . It’s only 99° in the veranda of the Bachelors’ Quarters. Come along up there. We have slung another hammock, and have put a melon to cool in the water-cask. He is a real whopper; green champagne—the first of the season.”

“ Mark and Joseph,” said Gretta, solemnly, “ the thought of that melon is too much for me. As Uncle Blaize would remark, ‘ A melon is an agreeable fruit upon a hot day.’ I’ll go, but I make one condition: you’ll be good enough to refrain from your unseemly jokes in the presence of your tutor.”

“ Oh, Durnford is not at the quarters,” said Jo. “ He marched out with his Euripides directly after lessons, and is half-way to Knapp’s Cliff by now. You can air your views quite freely, Gretta. Honor bright. I say, I’m sorry you have settled against Ferguson; I should not have objected to him as a brother-in-law. He’s a real good chap—a sort of Geoffrey Hamlyn fellow, you know. By George! he can sit a buck-jumper; and you should just have seen him running down an ‘ old man ’ when we were kangaroo-hunting at Gundalunda. But I suppose he isn’t what you’d call a cultivated chap.”

“ I’ll tell you what, Gretta,” said Mark, “ if I were you I would not clinch matters with anybody till Ferguson’s partner has come out from England. Bertram Wyatt will be here soon, now. You’ll have a rare good opportunity for comparing Young Australia with the superfine home articles—finished up at Oxford and extra-polished in the best London society.”

“ How do you know that, Mark?”

“ Did not you hear old Gustavus Blaize telling us all how he had been to Mr. Bertram Wyatt’s rooms during that last never-to-be-forgotten trip home, and had seen his chimney-glass stuck full of invitations from all kinds of swells. I thought it was a rum place to put them.”

“ When Gustavus Blaize dies, if he ever gets to heaven’s

gate, he'll say it is not good enough for him, and ask to be sent back to England," remarked Jo.

"Look here, Gretta," continued Mark, impressively, "you must try your hand on Mr. Bertram Wyatt. You'll find it good practice to flirt with him. Think of the experience he has had; and, as you can not be everybody's first love, your pride needn't be hurt by playing second fiddle to the governor's daughter."

"Mark, you are vulgar, you are insulting!" cried Gretta.

"Aunt Judith says that Mr. Wyatt is still broken-hearted," said Mrs. Clephane, "and that Miss Baldock was very fond of him. It was her father that broke off the match. And, now that General Baldock has been moved to this governorship, Aunt Judith has quite made up her mind that the engagement will be on again."

"Come, boys," said Gretta, "let us go and attack the melon. Where's Jinks? Hester, are you coming?"

"No," replied Hester. "My head is aching, I want a walk."

"Don't go too far," said Sebastian. "There is a storm brewing—and a hail-storm if I know the sky."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Gretta. "Then there's some hope that we may spend to-night in our beds instead of lying gasping in the hammocks. Collect all the hailstones you can, boys, and put them in the dairy. To-morrow is my churning-day."

"I wish," said Mrs. Clephane, as they walked up toward the Bachelors' Quarter, a wooden verandaed cottage midway between the house and the stock-yard, "that Hester would stay in this afternoon. She'll get soaked."

"Oh!" said Gretta, carelessly, "it won't be the first time. An idea strikes Hester, and she starts up and carries it through without thinking of anything else. She has got excited over poetry or something, and wants a vent for her feelings."

CHAPTER IV.

HESTER'S SORROW.

HESTER MURGATROYD was left alone. She glanced up at the sky and then toward the mountains. The twin peaks of Tieryboo looked gray and threatening against a background of grayish cloud; but Comongin stood forth

clear. Comongin was the Doondi weather-glass. By the law of signs and tokens, she assured herself, there would be no storm before night-fall.

Not that it would have kept her at home. Gretta was right. Poor Hester was in the mood to be soothed by the strife of elements. What matter if it thundered and hailed? The crash and the terror would be welcome—anything to divert her mind from the dreary aching, the sense of suffocation she was enduring. She must be alone. She must escape from Sib's dumb solicitude, from the boys' witless jokes, from Gretta's girlish levity. She must draw deep breaths, and let out the pain which was choking her.

Hester went forth. She walked swiftly across the paddock, through the sliprails, and past a blacks' camp which lay between the fence and the river. The king of the tribe, a white-haired, mangy-looking chieftain, sat enthroned upon the opossum rug, his boomerang and waddy by his side, and a dirty clay pipe between his toothless jaws. Other dusky forms covered with hideous weals and blue hieroglyphics, sprawled on red blankets at the opening of their gunyahs. The gins, or elder women, blear-eyed emaciated creatures, lay basking in the sun, liberally displaying their tattooed limbs, and ministering alternately to the wants of their lords and their piccaninnies. The lubras—girls—smoother of skin and with the comeliness of dancing eyes and glistening teeth, leaned against the trees and plaited dilly-bags, or gnawed bones while they chattered like a covey of parrots.

The old king playfully launched a waddy in the direction of the new-comer, and bestirred himself so far as to call back the dogs which ran barking from the camp.

“Hester, where you go, Hester?” cried his majesty. “Stop and woollah along a old man. Old man cobbon sick.” Then followed whining cries, “Hester, white Mary! Budgery white Mary. This ole woman cobbon poor fellow Ba’al toombacco! Ba’al blanket! Ba’al rations!” And then another series of groans, and the advance of a bevy of gins, each one more piteous and more loquacious than her companion.

Hester moved aside to escape these importunities, and, forsaking the horse-track, walked where no path was, by the edge of the river which girt the plain and wound up into the mountains.

The white cedar spread its scented plumes of lilac-blossom above her head. The glossy-leaved chestnut dropped its heavy pods at her feet. The ti-trees touched her shoulders with their crimson bottle-brush flowers. In some places the bed of the river was wide, and cattle-tracks led down to a natural crossing. The stream gurgled gently over round stones and brilliant rock crystals, and the banks, shelving backward, were overgrown by a spiky yellow-flowered cactus which gave forth a strong perfume; while here and there, a tiny landslip sheltered brakes of maidenhair fern. Now, a fallen log intercepted the water's course, and the stream fell in a miniature cascade into some deep dark pool, where eddies twirled sluggishly over a fathomless hole, and driftwood gathered thickly at flood-mark; or again, the channel contracted between grassy cliffs, or the current flowed turbid and dark by fringing beds of deadly arums and thickets of mulgams.

Hester trod carefully, alive from habit to a sense of danger, and once or twice started aside in dread of the *piora* serpent, which frequents the banks of creeks, or paused to assure herself that some stick lying at her feet was not a black snake or a sleeping death-adder.

Gradually, she left the plain behind, and the country grew wilder, as the river entered a defile, which narrowed almost to a point between granite hills. At the distance of about a mile and a half from the paddock-fence the ravine widened again. On one side, the river ran close under a steep rise, on which the long-bladed grass grew rank, and bracken fern offered no temptation to adventurous kine; on the other, the hills sloped more gently to the level; and, jutting out beneath the rocky crest of an inaccessible-looking ridge, rose a grassy knoll, its summit a plateau, in the center of which was a green patch fenced by iron railings.

Here, a giant eucalyptus of the kind called "apple-tree," which somewhat resembles the oak, spread its branches over a little cemetery containing but one grave—that of a child.

Hester ascended the rise, and, unlocking the iron gate with a key which she took from her pocket, entered the inclosure.

Maafu the Kanaka had been there that morning. This, Hester saw at a glance. The fallen leaves of the evergreen currajong-tree, which shadowed the grave, had been

lately swept. The grass was newly mown, there were no dead blossoms upon the flowering verbena plants which covered the little mound. The headstone was wreathed with jasmine, recently clipped, so that it might not encroach upon the inscription, which ran thus:

In Memory of MAGGIE,
Only child of HESTER MURGATROYD, and granddaughter of
DUNCAN REAY,
Who died at Doondi, of diphtheria, Sept. 23, 18—,
Aged 4 years,
" And death carried her child to the Unknown Land."

Hester sunk upon the grass. She stretched out her arms upon the grave and hid her face upon them. Sobs shook her frame.

"Oh, my baby! my baby!" she whispered to the sod. "Why were you taken from me? It was cruel—it's unjust. Women can't live without something to love. They weren't meant to. They've got hearts. If I had had you I should never have thought—I should not feel like this."

The rising gasps, drawn up as it were from the depths of her being, stifled this pitiful plaint. When her tears began to fall she grew calmer, and after a little while lifted her wet face, and raised herself to a crouching attitude, her hands clasping her knees, her eyes fixed on vacancy.

She sat thus for some time, formless fancies floating through her mind—all bringing a sense of bitterness and indefinite injury, with something black and terrible in the background which she had not courage to examine. She was too wretched to think collectedly. She felt dazed; and, also, a womanly instinct made her shrink from analyzing the cause of her misery. She saw only images of possibilities, fair and ennobling, shadowed upon a blank wall, which seemed to shut her out from a realization of the actual. Then a stinging suggestion smote her, and in a moment her mental attitude was changed. The blood came rushing to her cheeks, and she started up as though she had found the smart intolerable. Involuntarily she stretched forth her arms, as if to push the doubt from her, then let them fall helplessly by her side, and stood erect, her eyes gazing outward in tearless dismay, while her lips trembled like those of a frightened child. "It's because of me," she said, in a broken whisper, "that he is going away. It

is because he thinks that I am—because I—” The pain shook her beyond self-control. Her hands were flung over her burning face. “Oh, I do love him!” she said, aloud. “I do love him! I can’t bear it.”

The cry brought relief. She restlessly paced the inclosure. There crept over her a sense of spiritual companionship with the person who filled her thoughts. Every now and then, she glanced round moved by the fancy that he was near. It had grown curiously dark, and the sultriness had increased. Scarcely a leaf stirred. There was no sound but that of the rushing river below. Overhead, the sky was gray-green, and, lower on the horizon, lurid. To the east, there were banked masses of threatening cloud, upon which, by a curious atmospheric effect, the outline of the mountains was reflected. The lightning played in rapidly succeeding flashes. It was evident that one of those terrible tempests peculiar to the district was impending.

Hester felt no fear, though it was impossible that, even by walking at her utmost speed, she could reach home before the deluge broke. She had no impulse of self-preservation; on the contrary, a reckless excitement possessed her, and it almost seemed to her heated fancy that the fury of the elements was in some way connected with her own fate.

She lingered on, and every instant it grew darker. She had a vivid sense of Mr. Durnford’s nearness. But they had said that he was gone toward Knapp’s Cliff—miles from here. Well, she would go back. She knew of a deserted shepherd’s hut by the river-side which she might perhaps reach in time.

She opened the iron gate. The first peal of thunder shook the rocks. When it was over she heard a rustling in the long grass, and a quick decisive step approaching the grave-yard. The blood forsook Hester’s face. She turned and saw a man—tall, broad-shouldered, vigorous-looking—advancing across the plateau. It was Mr. Durnford. He pushed open the gate, and accosted her:

“Mrs. Murgatroyd, you here!”

She did not answer at that moment, for the thunder came again, and while they waited she looked at his face, noting with secret joy how full it was of concern and agitation. His gray eyes, which were usually dreamy, looked now wild and dilated, and she saw, in spite of his heavy

mustache and brown beard, that his lower lip was quivering.

"You are alone, and without any wraps, and in that thin dress. The storm will be upon us presently, and what can I do?"

"Nothing," said Hester, quietly. She had the feeling now that it did not matter what became of her. He was by her side.

"What could have induced you to wander so far from home? The storm has been threatening since four o'clock."

"You have been further than I."

"Oh, it is of no consequence what happens to me. But I don't know how I can shelter you. We could not cross the river to get to the old sheep-station. The question is, what are we to do?"

"Stay here and get wet," replied Hester, recklessly; "this is not the first time I have been caught in a storm. I rather like the sensation though I am not a poet. Doesn't this inspire you, Mr. Durnford? The lightning is very fine over Tieryboo."

He uttered an exclamation of dismay, and drew closer to her. Their eyes met. Again the thunder clanged, rumbling among the mountains and swelling loud again. Above the protracted roll might be heard a roar in the distance like the sound of a rushing cyclone. A keen wind had risen, bearing with it an icy chill. It was whirling about the dead leaves and laying low the grass and saplings. The limbs of the gum-trees writhed. The earth, which till now seemed to have held her breath as one dead, became in a minute alive and panting.

Durnford hastily stripped himself of his coat, wrapped it round Hester and drew her by the hand outside the inclosure.

"Don't you hear the hail?" he said, hoarsely. "If you are not afraid, I am frightened for you. But I have thought of something. There's a cave in those rocks above us. It's a short, hard climb. We must do it quickly; it's our only chance. Come!"

But, though she trembled at the sound of the hail, Hester clung with curious hardihood to the wild upland.

"Mr. Durnford," she said, falteringly, "I can't climb. Let us stay here."

"Impossible! I will carry you. Come!"

She resisted no longer. Holding each other's hands, they ran along the plateau and began to scale the hill behind it. He hurled himself forward, clearing with one arm a way through the scrubby undergrowth; while, with the other, he drew her upward. In the intervals between the thunder-crashes they could hear the distant roar, swelling in volume and almost drowning the cries of birds and reptiles and the stampede of frightened kangaroos; while, glancing backward for a second, they beheld, like a leaden curtain obscuring the landscape, the onrushing sheet of hail. Panting and bruised from their stumbles over the stones which at every footfall were sent rolling into the valley below, Hester and Durnford paused for a moment to survey what remained of the ascent. By the forked flashes they saw the bristling cliff close above them; and at its base, scarcely visible from the knoll below, was a triangular fissure in the mountain, hollowed out at the sides, and affording space for a family of native bears to dwell comfortably, or for two human beings to crouch in perfect security from the tempest.

But a slanting precipice, jagged and tapestried with prickly creepers, intervened between them and the refuge they sought. The gloom was as of night; and, save for the lightning which every instant played round the mountain's grim outlines, they could scarcely have seen where to cling for foothold. Hester had relinquished Durnford's hand, leaving him free, while she tried to scramble in his wake. But her foot slipped upon the crimson blossoms of the *kennedia* and she fell, uttering a cry of helplessness. The thorns of the stouter creepers to which she held tore her fingers. By the aid of a sapling gum-tree Durnford had swung himself higher; now, stooping, he put his arm round Hester, and, by an exertion of strength only possible to one trained to athletic feats, lifted her to the ledge upon which he stood; thus, by three or four desperate efforts he reached the foot of the cliff. There was not a moment to be lost; the earth shook beneath them, and a few yards from where they stood, the advancing hail beat with the force of iron against the rocks. One leap. A vivid flash illuminated the wall before them; and he bore her almost fainting into the cleft.

A rock wallabi, startled from its lair, flew past them. Durnford drew Hester further into the cave. It was larger

than they had imagined, and in the center they could stand upright. The rain was now descending in torrents, and the air had become icy cold. Hester shivered, and he folded his coat more closely round her. At intervals they could see each other's pallid faces; but in that awful din it would have been impossible for human voice to make itself heard. But there was no need of speech. His eyes revealed what his lips might not have dared to utter. A wild delight thrilled Hester. She knew that he loved her.

At the height of the storm, when, simultaneously, flash blinded and roar deafened, Durnford put out his hand and clasped that of Hester. They held each other thus like children to whom contact gives a sense of safety and comfort, and yet with that deeper consciousness which set the hearts of both wildly beating.

CHAPTER V.

LOVE TALK.

THE violence of the storm was abated. The hail no longer clattered against the cliff; it lay piled in jagged masses at the mouth of the fissure. The sharp thunder-claps had ceased; and there was only a muttering as of spent wrath, rising and falling among the more distant mountains. The storm was flying westward; and in the east, toward which the cleft opened, the sky was blue again. A pale gray light, like that preceding dawn, suffused the valley, and the drowned hills rose up once more clear and beautiful. The joyous gurgling of innumerable new-born rills mingled with the beat of steadily falling rain. The insects had begun to hum again. Nature's aspect was now benignant; the desire of the earth was satisfied.

Hester withdrew her hand from Durnford's clasp. She felt faint and dizzy. It was with difficulty that she moved to the mouth of the cave. There she sunk upon a projecting ledge and leaned her head against the lichen-covered rock. A drop of rain trickled through a crevice above, and wetted her forehead. The coldness of it awoke her, as it were, from a dream of death and heaven. She had been, it seemed to her, so near both. And Durnford's touch seemed still to cling about her like something living and insistent.

He came close to her.

“ You know that I love you,” he said.

It was the supreme moment; and she knew now that, though she had never consciously pictured it to herself, the anticipation of it had been for months underlying her existence. In the reaction from her excitement she trembled like a frightened child; and, covering her face with her hands, wept softly, with joy rather than with sorrow. In love, joy and sadness interblend so closely that to separate them is an impossibility. He waited by her side till she was calm again, and the tears no longer oozed from between her fingers. Drawing down her hands, he held them against his breast. She was forced to bend toward him and to meet his eyes, in which an intense, grave yearning was pent. The bright steadfastness of his gaze inspired her with a feeling of self-abandonment, and of entire reliance upon his truth and power to make her life beautiful and happy. She did not think of responsibility incurred by him or herself—or if for a second, woman-like, it struck her that he might be hurtfully affected, she thrust away the idea. His words seemed to have plunged her into a delicious stupor. She knew that he was speaking again, that he was telling her of his love; and his voice sounded strange and sweet. Then the thought flooded her mind like the echo of a past pain. This would not last; and she cried out, “ You will not go away? You will not leave me?”

“ No,” he answered, “ I will not leave you till you bid me go.”

“ But, you were—you meant to accept the appointment?” she said, hesitatingly.

“ You heard—?” he began, starting as if with compunction. “ It was base of me to let it come upon you so suddenly—I should have spoken to you. But—”

“ I understand,” she said. “ You—it would have hurt me.”

“ This is all wrong,” he exclaimed, passionately. “ The other would have been most just to you.”

“ It is hard—to be just,” she said, slowly.

“ It is impossible, if justice be to keep silence.”

“ No,” she answered, “ I think there’s one compact we ought to make—that is, to be open with each other—even if we are to be parted.”

"We can't be parted. Love has rights that won't be gainsaid. How can one fight against human nature?"

"Oh," she said, sadly, "we ought not to think like that. We ought to think of what is our duty."

"Duty does not command us to turn away from affection which is helpful. I can do you good by staying here? I can make your life happier?"

"I don't know if it would be right," she said, hesitatingly.

"Don't you see?" he said. "The thing was done when I told you that I loved you. What might have been right a little while ago would be wrong now. A word makes all the difference—a look even—and there's a bond it would be wicked to break."

"I did not intend to speak of myself but of you," she said. "I ought not to take your love. If it were not for me you would marry—",

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "Do you suppose that such a possibility as my marriage with any one else has ever occurred to me since I knew you? I shall never marry. I'm too poor, for one thing. Do I do you any good?" he asked, suddenly.

"Yes," she answered, looking up into his face.

"Then that's all that matters."

"Oh!" she said, "a great deal matters besides that."

His face saddened. He was silent for a few moments.

"You are right," he said, quietly. "There's a great deal besides. Things that it would be folly to shut our eyes to."

"What things?"

"The fret—of a doubtful position."

She moved a little uneasily.

"You mean that we can not be open about our feeling for each other?"

"Yes—the necessity to guard looks and words—so that a false construction should not be put upon our friendship."

"Do you find it hard?" she asked, and flushed a little. "I never thought of that."

"I am bound to think of it, for your sake. Yes, it's hard; sometimes the effort to hold myself in has been almost too great. But perhaps it won't be so bad now."

"What other things?" she asked.

"There's the danger of loving each other too much; and, perhaps, by and by, the misery of separation. But we won't think of that, or of anything melancholy."

"No—not now."

"We can not give each other our lives, but sympathy should count for a great deal; and the happiness we have taken ought to counterbalance the pain that is inevitable."

"There must be pain," she said, slowly. "You have thought over it?"

"Yes," he replied. "I have considered possibilities and difficulties as they might affect you—not myself—oh no! How have I deserved this happiness? But, you—your position is hard. I feared that in speaking I might make it more so. I felt that it would perhaps be more manly to leave you without putting all to the test. I believed that you would understand. But, you see, this has come without our willing it: and, if there's suffering, the pain that guards against baseness may be a good we should cherish. There could never be baseness for us."

She drew back, loosing her hands. His words seemed to open vistas in her imagination. She exclaimed suddenly, "Oh, I can do you no good—I ought not to let you love me!"

"That has passed beyond your control—or mine," said Durnford, triumphantly. "It seems to me that there is but one great compelling fact in all the world—the fact that we love each other. Don't be sad," he added, in clear, tender tones; "there can be no gladness for me if you are sorry; and I am so full of happiness."

"I can not be sorry," said Hester, very low, "but there are things I see—you know—we can never be married." She looked at him straightly as she spoke; her face was very pale and quiet. "I shall cripple your life. It would be like wasting everything upon a shadow. You would be sorry, after a time, that you had ever known me."

He looked at her with troubled appeal. "You don't really believe that; you could not say it if you had any conception of how, ever since I began to care for you, you have filled my life. You cripple it! Why, you have lifted me on wings. You have given me a soul. If it were my fate to be shut up in a dungeon for the rest of my existence I would not shorten a day of it, for my soul would be with

yours, and every hour I should say to myself, 'Hester loves me,'"

"I do love you," said Hester, with grave sweetness. They moved toward each other and kissed tremblingly. No further protests were made. In the minds of both there was a kind of awe, and upon their happiness a shadow of trouble rested. Neither could have analyzed this consciousness, but it was deep in both their hearts. A barrier had been passed. They stood in an unknown region full of glamour and mystery, which yet they hardly dared explore. It was safer to turn back toward the past, and view it, transformed as it seemed by the enchanted light which now illuminated it. Scenes were retraced, and questions asked—brokenly at first—the "whys" and "whens" to which lovers's early confidences tentatively shape themselves. And then they said, how wonderful had been the combinations of circumstance—how marvelous the interwindings of the threads! How strange was this unexpected meeting among the hills! How manifest the interposition of Fate!

"It was like a wild dream—the being alone together in the midst of the storm," Hester said, and her voice quavered. She looked at him with a solemn pleading, as though asking him whether she ought to check the outpourings of her heart. "I have been wishing—I was so wretched," she faltered.

"Tell me everything," he said. "You are right. That's the one compact we must make—perfect openness. It is so much better that we should each know what has been in the mind of the other—even if it gives pain."

"It is all different now," said Hester; "there is not that terrible separateness—that lonely misery. This afternoon when I left home it did not seem to matter what happened to me. I wanted to be alone, where no one could see or hear me."

"My poor darling," he said.

"I thought you had guessed, and that you despised me. It came upon me like a great shock when Gretta said that you were going away, though I had been unhappy for a long time. But to-day—I thought that you would never know—that we should neither of us know—"

"You had been unhappy for a long time," repeated Durnford, with a sort of groan.

"I did not know at first that it was because I cared for you," said Hester, speaking with the simplicity of a child.

"You mustn't think I was always sad. At first it was as though something had come into my life which made it fuller and more complete. I felt gayer over my work, and the days did not drag so heavily, and I liked wandering over the hills and thinking of you—I did not think then—of this," she added, hastily, and colored.

"Dear heart of mine!" murmured Durnford.

"I seemed to be always seeing your eyes," continued Hester. "All sorts of things used to come into my mind which I wanted to say to you. And, when we did talk, I added so much afterward in thought to our conversation that it was difficult to tell how much had been said and how much imagined."

"Oh," he said, "I know that feeling."

"But it did not matter much, for I was certain that you understood a great deal without words."

"And I also," said Durnford. "It used to puzzle me. In the evening when I sat alone at my work the sense of your presence was often so vivid with me that I would turn to you for sympathy, feeling that in spirit at least you were by my side."

"Do you remember—" began Hester, and broke off smiling—half in joy, half in melancholy. "It is foolish to go back to such little things, but it is pleasant to think of them. Do you remember one day when we sat by the creek, and you were reading a translation of Richter's 'Fruit, Flower and Thorn Pieces,' how your voice trembled at the place where Natalie gives Firmian the green rose-branch, saying, 'When they are young, they hardly prick at all'? Natalie was right, I think. It is when the roses are gathered in full bloom that the thorns pierce deepest."

"Well," he said, smiling, "I asked you, I remember, whether you would rather that the roses should remain always closed buds and you answered, 'Yes.' That reply decided me to leave you. You did not guess that day by the river, how near I was to self-betrayal."

"I was thinking," said Hester, and there was a note of suppressed passion in her voice, "of the misery which comes through mistakes and destroyed illusions—of how one clutches greedily at what one believes to be happiness, and finds it only dust and ashes. That was what hap-

pened to me when I was very young. And so you avoided me?" she added, hurriedly, not allowing him to comment upon what she had hinted at. "Every day I looked forward to the evening, and when evening came it was the same story: 'Mr. Durnford was writing and would not come.' We did not know then that you were a poet. Though when Mr. Gustavus Blaize told us of his great discovery, that you were the author of 'Soul and Star,' it seemed to me that I must have felt it all the time I was reading the book."

"Ah," said Durnford, "I had written my heart out, and every line of the poem held a message for you. You have inspired all in it that's worth anything. How curious but true," he added, thoughtfully, "the intuitive way in which a poet's writing corresponds with the nature of the woman he is writing about! It's no conscious process in the poet's mind; but I am sure the instinct is a truthful one. Whenever your nature puzzles me a little, and I want to understand you better, I look at the sonnets I have written to you." He laughed shortly. "I cursed Gustavus Blaize for his meddling. Of course I believed that you would guess my secret, and resent being gibbeted in that fashion. But you were so sweet, so tender. I ought to have gone away after our meeting—again down by the grave-yard there. You recollect—the clear winter's day and the rock-lilies out, and the poinsettia flaming against the railings. And you wore a bunch of *hoya* in your belt. You dropped it. I have the withered thing now."

To Hester this back wandering was sweet. But it filled him with agitation of which he was half afraid, and his inward vision of bewildering possibilities forced him to hold his utterances in check. He had paused abruptly, and went closer to the cave's mouth, his face turned from her. The rain was still pouring, and a blustering wind swept in gusts down the valley and beat against the cliff, driving before it fallen leaves and snapped-off branches, the *débris* left by the storm. Above the sound of wind and rain rose the rushing of the lately swollen river.

With a sigh Hester stirred. "Look!" said she, pointing to the heavens, which were now irradiated by a gleam from the west, "the sun will soon be setting, and we are a long way from home."

"Oh!" cried Durnford, passionately, "to think that there is this world of solitude, and not one corner of it where we can dwell alone together! No; we may not leave our refuge yet. There's a moon to-night; it will light us down the precipice. And I can not let you expose yourself to this drenching rain. The wind is driving it away. A little while, and we shall be safe in starting homeward."

Hester silently acquiesced, and remained still waiting for him to come back to her side. Presently he turned, and the thought which had been racking him burst forth fiercely. "There is hope," he said; "the hope of your freedom!"

CHAPTER VI.

HESTER'S STORY.

HESTER started, and exclaimed, shuddering slightly, "Oh, don't. You must not think of that—it is wicked. One might wish, and the wish would be murder in thought. If you knew how I have prayed to be delivered from that temptation."

He became calm instantly, and, seating himself beside her, took her hand in his. "Forgive me," he said; "we will never speak of it again."

"You do not know the story of my marriage?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Very imperfectly."

"You ought to know. I was much to blame. I deserved partly what came afterward." She turned her head away, and he saw that a tear rolled down her cheek.

"You were very young," he said, hesitating, partly from ignorance of a subject which was a forbidden one at Doondi and partly from dread of setting loose a flood of sorrowful recollection.

"Barely seventeen. But—I will tell you everything if you care to listen."

"I long to know your sad history and to comfort you. But do not speak of it if it would pain you."

She made a quick gesture. "I want you to know."

"Did you love him?" asked Durnford, suddenly, and a moment later was angry with himself for having asked the question. She waited some seconds before answering.

"Yes," she said, at length, "I suppose that I must have loved him or I could not have gone through all that I did in order to marry him. I disobeyed my father and cut myself off from my own people for his sake. But it was not the sort of love that stands the test of nearness. It was fed on dreams, ignorance, and self-will. You don't know what a romantic girl I was—my head stuffed full of novels and poetry, and all kinds of nonsense. And then, I dare say we weren't very carefully brought up. I ran wild; Mollie was the quiet one and the good housekeeper. She got on well with father. You know he is very odd in many ways. He'll never give in about anything. If it hadn't been for my trouble and my coming back to him like a beggar I know he would not have forgiven me all my life."

Hester paused and laughed sadly. "My training wasn't much excuse for me, however. See how admirably Mollie has turned out. She didn't care for novels."

Durnford laughed sadly.

"I'm a believer in the doctrine of original sin," Hester went on. "I am sure that under no circumstances could Mollie have behaved as I did; nor could she have the feelings that I have sometimes—still."

Hester sighed. Presently she continued:

"I was solitary in my ways and fond of imagining myself into dramatic situations. I used to like wandering about the bush by myself—just as I do now. He was employed as superintendent to some navvies who were at work on a telegraph line near us—that was in Victoria; we have been living on the Eura only about ten years—I used to meet him in my walks—and then he would tell me stories of his adventures. He had been in America. His life had been a very wild one; it sounded unlike anything I had ever heard of; it roused my interest and curiosity. Then he asked me to marry him. I remember that I went about that time for a week to Melbourne, and saw 'The Lady of Lyons' acted one night. It impressed my imagination as nothing else has ever done. I felt like Pauline; he was Claude Melnotte. Did I tell you that he was beneath me in birth?—and, of course, he had no money. We were poor too, but my father always thought a great deal about our being well-born, and expected us to marry gentlemen. I disliked all the squatters I saw; they seemed to me so commonplace. Lance Murgatroyd was different; though in

many ways he was like a working-man, he had read a good deal, and could sing love-songs to queer, wild Indian tunes. He was handsome too, with bold black eyes, and a reckless dare-devil kind of manner which I thought then very grand and fascinating. I fancied that there would be something heroic in leading a rough life with him—in sacrificing my prospects for love of him. My meetings with him were all clandestine—you will see from this that I could not have been a nice-minded girl—”

“ You were as innocent as you were ignorant,” exclaimed Durnford; “ and it was upon this that the scoundrel traded.”

“ At last they were found out,” she went on, “ and my father forbade me ever to see him again. Well I—I ran away with him; and we were married. Then came the awakening. Oh, it was bitter!—bitter!—every day, every hour bringing some fresh revelation. All the veil of worship and romance torn down, and, underneath, coarseness which revolted me. I grew to dread being alone with him—to dread hearing him speak.”

Hester’s voice faltered. Again Durnford tenderly besought her not to recall what must be painful to her.

“ No; I’d rather tell you. When he saw that I shrunk from him it got worse—he became rude and violent. He used to say that he wanted to break my spirit; and he taunted me, and coerced me, making me do things I disliked till I felt like a mad thing. I didn’t think of duty or of my obligations as a wife. I used to say things to him which exasperated him. I never tried to gain any influence over him by means of his affection for me, for he did care for me after his fashion. It was an affection which repelled me and made me hate him. All I wished was to keep him at arm’s-length. That made him savage, reckless. He took to drinking, and then he began to beat me.”

Durnford groaned. His grasp of Hester’s hand tightened. His eyes were fixed upon her face in dumb, indignant pity.

“ I don’t know why I tell you all this,” she said. “ There’s no use in making you unhappy.”

“ Go on,” he said.

“ It lasted for two years, and then I could bear it no longer.” Her voice became tremulous again. “ I couldn’t bear to think that my child would grow up to hear such

language and—I had a baby; the little thing that is buried there"—she motioned to the grave-yard. "One night when he was lying drunk I left him. I went out into the bush with my baby in my arms. I put a letter beside him in which I said that I hated him, and that chains shouldn't drag me back to that life of misery and degradation. Often when I stand looking at the stars I think of that night, and of how I guided myself by the Southern Cross in the direction of a station not far from where we lived. The people there drove me to a township, and at last I got to my father, and he took me in and sheltered me."

Then there were tears in Durnford's eyes when she ceased speaking. With the gesture of a child who has told her miserable tale and asks for sympathy she put her cheek against his shoulder.

"See how I love you. See how I trust you," she said. "I tell you everything. No; there's more still to tell. Perhaps the worst, for it is a shame on the name I bear. Looking back, I see that things might have been different if I had been different—if I had tried to make him better. I see now that there was good in him, and I am sure that he loved me. If I had had strength and courage, and had accepted my lot, perhaps in time the doing of one's duty might have brought some sort of satisfaction; and he would have been saved from what happened after I had deserted him. My going away and the drink drove him furious. The story was in all the newspapers—I read it. Even now I can remember it almost word for word. They were drinking in a public-house. One of his companions on the line jeered at him for having married a lady. My husband drew a knife upon the man and killed him. He was tried for manslaughter and sentenced to seven years' penal servitude. His term was prolonged because of his attempting to escape. It expired a year ago. That day when I promised to be your friend I had heard the news of his release."

Hester paused. There fell silence between them; but it was silence fraught with the deepest meaning. Again, Durnford rose from her side, and stood looking forth at the wreck and havoc which the storm had made. It seemed to him typical of the story which had just been told him. At that moment a driving mass of clouds parted, and through the rift the westering sun sent down a golden ray. This gleam irradiating the mountains---and bringing, as it were,

promise of renewed vigor to the torn and bleeding trees—struck him also as symbolic. Not forever was Hester doomed to drag on this maimed weighted existence. A wrench, and her bonds might be broken. Thoughts welled up in his breast which seemed to demand a complete readjustment of his moral attitude ere they could be translated into words. The injustice of Fate inflamed him to a paroxysm of rebellion. With eager straining, he mentally scanned the back-stretching vistas of her miserable youth. The more hopeless and exceptional her lot, the greater justification did it offer for an overleaping of conventional obstacles.

He turned, paced the cave hurriedly for some moments, then halted before her, love-words burning upon his lips. Her full gaze rested upon his face, and perceived clearly the signs of inward tumult and conflict. Her fine instinct realized, though it did not comprehend, the situation. With a woman's shrinking from the fiercer phases of man's nature she sought to avert the impending crisis. Rising from the ledge of rock, she held out to him his coat which he had wrapped round her, and which she had taken off upon entering the cave.

"I don't want it now," she said, quietly. "I'm not wet or cold. Put it on, and let us go home."

He obeyed her mechanically.

"Let us go," she repeated in the same gentle voice. "It has stopped raining."

"Ought we to go? Must we go?" he asked, dreamily. "Can't we stay a little longer?"

"They will be sending out search-parties," she answered, with trembling voice.

She moved into the interior of the cave where her hat had been thrown. The darkness seemed to swallow her up. He felt as though some taint in him had repelled her. The fear of spiritual antagonism between them chilled his hot impulse, and wrought in him a sudden revulsion of feeling. He approached her, and brought her back to the light. They stood hands clasped, and their eyes communed wordlessly. At last she said simply, "You have made me very happy. I can never be lonely again."

The little speech, and all the trust in it, brought them once more very near to each other. His being vibrated in more noble harmonies. This was not the moment for

analysis; but what scope has the poetic faculty if it be not infinitely analytical? It was characteristic of Durnford to say,

“ We will be happy, as happy as those who feel deeply can be in this painful world. The relation between us may be one of the most beautiful and poetic that ever existed between poet and woman. Above all, we will consecrate to each other our best selves. That other self will be the guardian angel to each—and not alone in its mission. Wherever two persons are concerned, there are always three souls—the man’s, the woman’s, and the soul of Eternal Right. The true soul in us will distinguish between the Eternal Right and the Conventional Right. We can fearlessly bow to that judgment.”

They parted hands, but kissed not again. There was to him a deep meaning in this reticence. He would not at that moment let his eyes meet hers. They cast a lingering glance backward into the cave, henceforth a sacred temple, and then out upon the chastened landscape. The valley lay in shadow, but the hills were bathed in golden light, like the smile after weeping; and the wind had died down.

CHAPTER VII.

AMONG BARBARIANS.

“ MRS. BLUEBEARD’s mamma thought it a fine thing to be mother-in-law to a respectable three-tailed bashaw. Well, there are advantages—in Australia—to be gained from having married the daughter of a rabid oppositionist.”

The speaker was Captain Clephane; the young lady he addressed, his niece Isabel Gauntlett.

“ What does that mean, Uncle Jack?”

“ Why, on the strength of Duncan Reay’s enmity to the Eura River Railway, I have got an order from the Minister for Works to the effect that we are to be dropped at five o’clock to-morrow morning before the slip-rails of Ferguson’s home-paddock. Now make yourself comfortable, Isabel, and try to imagine you are traveling by the Great Western.”

“ That’s not very easy, Uncle Jack.”

“ By George! no—not while we are in a vapor-bath, with

these confounded mosquitoes pitching into us. However, we shall get rid of them when we have passed through the sheoak swamps. In the meantime I'll see what my swag can produce; Persian insect-powder, and a wisp of old Jerry's mane—or, better still, a lump of smoking grass-tree out of the station-master's office. Hi, Beamish!"

The train had stopped before a road-side station, standing in a clearing, against a background of shivering swamp-oak trees. Except for a gaunt red-faced man—who in deference to his position wore a coat with a badge upon it slung over one shoulder, but whose chest was bare, and his sleeves tucked up over the elbow—the rough platform was perfectly vacant; neither passengers nor goods were turned out, nor did the official appear to think there was any necessity for shouting the name of the station.

"You're more than an hour behind time. I thought you was another special and that they'd knocked off the reg'lar," said he to the guard, in a tone of indolent banter.

"Oh, we only does that when the Government members ain't up to the scratch, or when the ministers want an outing, or when the Premier's daughter gets married and must have a special to take her honey-mooning up the mountains," rejoined the guard.

"Well, it's a thankless business finding fault with one's bread and butter, but old Duncan Reay was jolly well right; and, if this 'ere line wasn't made for the convenience of a few cursed squatters, why I'm d——d."

"Look out, Beamish!" said a voice from one of the carriage-windows, the same which had called to him previously. "Here's one of the obnoxious crew, and on his way up from spreeing in Leichardt's Town. What do you think of that?"

"Good-evening, Cap'en Clephane," said Beamish, advancing to the compartment. "Well, and I says that you deserve your spree; and I always says, cap'en, that for a d——d squatter, you be's one of the hardest-working chaps I know. It's not that I'm agen the squatters; and if you was to stand, cap'en, I'd give you my vote. But be a Liberal or else be a blasted Conservative. Don't you go mixing the two like this 'ere Ministry. With them it's 'you stick by me and I'll stick by you,' and hang the country."

"I'm sorry you have such a bad opinion of your legisla-

tors," said Clephane. "It'll be a satisfaction to you to hear, Beamish, that there was a row in the House last night, and that it's reported we shall soon have a change of ministry. But just let me remind you, there's a lady in here fresh from England; and she didn't know before she started that we made railways out in Australia for the convenience of mosquitoes. I see you have got some grass-tree burning in there. Give us a tin of it like a good fellow."

"All right, cap'en. I beg the lady's pardon, I thought it was Mrs. Clephane or Miss Reay; and they know our ways." Beamish hurried off, but presently returned bearing a bucket containing some smoking peat-like fuel, which emitted a resinous and not unpleasant odor. This he placed on the floor of the carriage, and the fumes mounted upward, creating at first a commotion among the buzzing mosquitoes.

"Good-night, cap'en," said Beamish. "Glad to hear you are going in for a northern station; you'll never make much out of Tieryboo, though you needn't be afraid of Free Selectors there. Good-night, miss. I hope you'll like the bush." The signal was given and the train moved slowly on.

"Phew!" said Captain Clephane. "That's better. How are you now, Isabel?"

"Pretty well, thank you, uncle. I can't say that I feel much like going down to Devonshire. And to think that it is nearly Christmas-time, and that they are all shivering at Heatherleigh! I never felt so hot in my life."

"It's very good for you, my dear—just what you have been sent here for. But you mustn't forget, though the thermometer is over 90°, that you are under an open window, and that you have got lungs." He unstrapped a valise, and drew from it a light rug and a whisk made out of a bundle of horsehair tied to a whip-handle, which he began to flourish over his companion's head. "Now just wrap my poncho round you, and I will put Jerry's tail into requisition till the mosquitoes get a bit stupefied. Poor Jerry! He was my best horse. Killed by a snake-bite!"

"Uncle," said the girl, touching the handle, "what a sweet smell! What is it?"

"Myall wood, my dear. One that I carved in my new chum days ready for the thong. A new chum is no longer a new chum when he can plait a stock-whip."

Captain Clephane was a bronzed, handsome man of about forty. In appearance he was an odd combination of the squatter and the hussar. He had little English ways, a certain *timbre* of voice, and small niceties of demeanor, which clashed with a rough-and-ready manner that it was easy to see had been assumed with the Crimean shirt, home-made coat, leather belt and pouch, and soft felt pugreedException hat. He seemed to look upon life with a dramatic eye and to enjoy playing his present part of settler in the Antipodes.

No tropical night could have been warmer than this upon which Isabel Gauntlett made acquaintance with the Australian bush. The air was steamy and oppressive, and occasional flashes of sheet-lightning in the distance, though the sky was perfectly clear overhead, told of impending thunder-storms. The train crept slowly through marshy grounds, misty with exhalations, and thickly overgrown with sheoak and wattle. Strange odors arose, and wild sounds, and the buzz of innumerable insects. The cries of curlew and morepork, and the gurgling coo-roo coo-r-r-roo of the swamp-pheasant, struck unfamiliarly upon Isabel's ear. A bright moon shed unbroken reflections upon the stagnant pools and imparted a ghostly aspect to the white-limbed trees which stretched out in eternal vistas. High above the vast solitude were set brilliant southern constellations new to the English girl—the Southern Cross, Aldebaran, the Scorpion, Orion, turned upside-down.

“What a strange, desolate world!” exclaimed Miss Gauntlett, drawing in her head after a comprehensive survey from the carriage-window, “No lights, except stars and glow-worms. No sign of human being or habitation, nothing but spectral trees. Is it an enchanted forest, Uncle Jack? And, good heavens!” as a prolonged and melancholy howling rent the air, “did you ever hear anything so eerie! it might be a banshee wailing. Are you sure it is quite canny?”

“Dingoes,” said Captain Clephane, who always preferred to use local nomenclature. “There's nothing distinctly uncanny in the Eura district except Debbil, the Bunyip, and Jinks in her tantrums; and I dare say that you will find an intimate connection between the three. Come, you will only see everlasting stretches of sheoak and

gum-trees. Lie down and let me cover you up and send you to sleep."

"Oh, it is all so new and delightful to me. I like the loneliness and immensity of the bush. Though I've only been two days in Australia I am deeply impressed by the bigness of things in general."

"Dearest Isabel," didactically remarked Captain Clephane, "the Australians are a fine race. They pride themselves upon their bigness—metaphorically speaking. There is nothing paltry about this country—it wasn't made for inch-rule measurements. You will observe that we are decidedly casual. Life is casual. Society is casual. A man may be a reputed millionaire; but if there happens to be a drought, a crisis, a fall in wool, or a visitation of pleuro-pneumonia, he will be a beggar not many months later. If people don't care to earn their grub we are so open-handed that they can always get it by loafing. A few miles more or less don't seriously affect one's landmarks. Where there isn't a bed handy there's bound to be a blanket. One isn't particular in counting a few stray head of cattle; and, though we can all swear a rounder in the stock-yard or on the drafting-camp, as a rule we are a happy-go-lucky peaceable lot. Now, as I hinted before, there are night-dews in Australia, and you have come out here to have a delicate lung patched up."

"I feel cured already, Uncle Jack. Three months at sea have made a different girl of me."

Nevertheless, Isabel Gauntlett sighed softly as she turned from the window. The sigh was like an echo of some past trouble, and seemed rather a note of relief than of pain. It was in harmony with her expression of grave serenity—of almost wistful resignation. This spirituality of countenance set her above the ordinary type of English girl, under which she might otherwise have been classed, for her features, though fairly well chiseled, had no very special claim to beauty. Her complexion was singularly clear, though rather pale; her eyes were blue, and looked larger than they in reality were, from the violet stains beneath the lower lids. She had the consumptive physique, which undoubtedly possesses a charm of its own, differing again in a marked degree from the anaemic type admired by the modern school. Her mouth was pretty and sensitive, and her

hair a pale flaxen. The face might have been insipid but for the darkness of brows and lashes.

Her dress was simple but artistically made, all its appointments dainty even to costliness. She took off her hat, covered her fair hair with a scarf of black lace, and lay down upon the carriage-seat, which, with the aid of rugs and with his valise for a pillow, Captain Clephane had turned into a comfortable couch. He still agitated Jerry's tail, remarking cheerfully that the brutes were beginning to settle upon the ceiling.

“Uncle Jack, you needn’t do that. I must get accustomed to mosquitoes, mustn’t I?”

“Not if you stay by the Eura. Mountain air is not favorable to the propagation of the species. Now, I’m going to talk, just to send you off to sleep. You needn’t listen or answer. My dear Isabel, they are always telling me that I’m not a practical man. It’s a sort of fixed axiom; it was grounded, I believe, upon a scheme I had for penning the wild pigs on Tieryboo, fattening ’em, and sending ’em to the Sydney market—the whole thing mis-carried because of the difficulty of getting them there. Then I had a plan for turning the marsupials into a profitable speculation; that didn’t do either. Well, perhaps I had better admit that I am apt to be carried away by first impressions. My first distinct impressions of the Eura district were absence of mosquitoes and magnificence of scenery, inaccessible peaks, splendid rocky gorges, brilliancy of coloring—for Australia—which was a relief to the eye after the salt-bush plains and mangrove flats of the coast-station, where I spent the days of my new-chumhood. A winter sunset, the sight of a flame-tree on the borders of a scrub, and—tell it not in Gath—the quantity of wild-duck in the river, decided my fate. Tieryboo was for sale. I had five thousand pounds to my credit at the bank. In vain the wise men pointed out to me that Tieryboo would fatten pigs but not cattle. I couldn’t tear myself from the spot. I bought it. I married Duncan Reay’s daughter. I’ve climbed every mountain within reach; I’ve botanized, discovered gold, coal, opals—always with this drawback—the mines hadn’t working capabilities. I have had no end of sport and amusement in shooting wild horses and running in scrubbers; but I am bound to confess that I have

not found it a profitable investment. What does it matter? I'm very happy. And think of the incalculable benefit one derives from being in a healthy moral atmosphere! Pure ozone, compared with the fetid breath of London society.” Jerry’s tail waved to and fro with redoubled vigor. “Dissipation, debt, philandering, false appearance, false sentiment, sham morality, froth, and slavery. That’s life over there. Here, a man is a man, and doesn’t require a tailor. Why, Mollie cuts out my shirts and I buy my breeches ready made at a Cheapjack store in Wyeroo. Are you listening, Isabel?”

“Yes, uncle; go on—I am very much interested.”

“That won’t do, you know. You must try and get drowsy. As for pleasure, if one considers the subject philosophically—I have been thinking it out—it’s a mere matter of comparison. Look at what our fellows used to go through—no end of discomfort—mosquitoes and all, in Norway—for the sake of sport.” Here Jerry’s tail maintained a regular and soothing motion. “Out here, sport is a mode of livelihood—that’s all the difference. I can’t see why a day after cattle should not be just as exciting as a day in Leicestershire. It’s purely the association of ideas. No, hang me if it is, though,” added Captain Clephane, abruptly changing his tone, while Jerry’s tail performed certain saltatory movements in the air. “A fellow riding to the meet in his pink coat and immaculate tops, feeling his horse under him, thorough-bred stock, veins quivering, ready for action, does range a little higher in the scale of creation than the stockman whose nag has been run up from the paddock by a black boy.” Clephane heaved a deep sigh. “How well I remember the Market Harborough meet, the day after the hunt ball! That was the last one I went to. The old-fashioned straggling village; the hounds panting on the green; carriages driving up in all directions; Gordon Creagh piloting the Empress; all the men one knew, full of chaff about the night before; the huntsman touching his cap; the master as keen as a fox; the pretty fresh-faced women with their Wolmerhausen habits and breast-knots of violets. I can hear now the clink-clink of the horses’ hoofs, and smell the fresh wintery smell! Then the stream up to the covert-side, where the hounds are opening; the sun shining out suddenly upon the pink coats, the canter across a furrowed field, the view-halloo! ‘He’s

off,' and the wild dash over the grass fields. Isabel, what's the matter? Aren't you asleep yet?"

"No, Uncle Jack; I'm laughing. There's such a marked contrast between the beginning of your tirade and the end. How about the hollow pleasures of an effete civilization and the glorious freedom of Australian life? I'm awake, and I want a map of the country."

"Easily given. Since we left Leichardt's Town this morning we have been traveling southward. In a few hours we shall be in the Eura River district; the capital, the mining township of Wyeroo. At right angles from Wyeroo are Tieryboo, Doondi, my father-in-law's station, and Gundalunda, our halting-place to-morrow."

"Who lives at Gundalunda?" asked Isabel.

"Why, it belonged to a Victorian speculator, and was managed by an overseer till last year, when two partners—bachelors—bought it. One of them, Mr. Bertram Wyatt, is on his way out from England; the other, a really good specimen of an Australian-born youth—handsome, honest, manly, and fairly cultivated—will probably meet us at his own slip-rails to-morrow morning."

"What is his name?"

"James Ferguson; but don't indulge in any romantic speculations, for he is very much in love with my sister-in-law, Gretta Reay."

"Ah, tell me about the Reays, Uncle Jack; and, first of all, what is the connection between Mr. Reay's animosity to railways and your order from the Minister for Works?"

"Oh, he is rather a power after his fashion. The Government are afraid of him because, though he hardly opens his lips in private, he is great at stonewalling tactics and can talk against time by the hour. He is a queer sort of fellow is Duncan Reay—a man of convictions which are invariably antagonistic to his private interests—a sort of Brutus who would deliver up his own son to the executioner. He was in the ministry, but split with his colleagues upon the question of railway extensions, upon which, as you have heard, he entertained the same views as our friend Beamish. Old Reay joined the opposition, carried through a dead-lock successfully. The business of the country was at a stand-still; no supplies could be voted. The navvies got up a rebellion, and the civil servants sent him a deputation. However, he carried his point, stopped

the branch line to Wyeroo, which would have considerably increased the value of his own property; then retired, like Cincinnatus, to his plow. Of late he has been maintaining a dignified neutrality. Colonial politics, my dear Isabel, usually consists of two interests. The 'bloated squattocracy' represents Australian Conservatism. Just now, the situation is serious—the Government is making a last struggle. Very shortly there will be loaves and fishes for distribution. Mollie is hoping to see her father Minister for Works, and old Duncan is waiting in suppressed excitement for his country to demand his services."

"And his daughters? I am longing to see them."

"Hester Murgatroyd, the eldest, made an unfortunate marriage; we never talk about it. Her husband has been in prison for the last ten years, and was let out some months ago. Next comes my Mollie, and then, several years lower down, Gretta, who matches James Ferguson as a genuine Australian product—most tyrannously pretty, and as little spoiled as human nature will permit, for she has always a string of admirers in tow to whom she makes herself impartially agreeable—a perfect type of the colonial belle—no pressure of conventionality to keep down the natural woman—no chaperonage forced upon her—quite capable of taking care of herself and aware of her own value, but as unaffected as a young lubra. She rode forty miles, to our second chief town, for a ball not long ago, having made her own dress and carried it in her swag; was the belle, of course, receiving with great equanimity the attentions of a certain young sprig of royalty on a tour of the world, in whose honor the entertainment had been given. The next day she rode home to set her milk and churn the butter. The servants had taken French leave in her absence, and Gretta buckled to and did all the cooking for a week. Well, you will be able to make your own observations shortly. We are all located at Doondi till after Christmas; but you must curb your impatience, for father-in-law and I have a little trip to make on business, and we shall leave you for a day or two at Gundalunda, under charge of Mrs. Blaize."

"And Mrs. Blaize?"

"Is James Ferguson's poor relation and housekeeper, a worthy soul, who tries to convert the blacks, and is the best hand at spicing rounds that I know. Mr. Blaize is

store-keeper, carpenter, general in-doors factotum. I dare-say that he earns his grub, but I doubt whether Ferguson considers the question. Mrs. Blaize's first husband was brother to the late Mrs. Reay. This establishes a sort of link between Doondi, Tieryboo, and Gundalunda; but the worst of the connection is that there's a brother-in-law, a certain Mr. Gustavus Blaize, Inspector of Public Works on the Eura, who is of an amorous tendency, and has a weakness for ladies' society and for long quotations, and is generally voted a most unmitigated bore. Now, Isabel, if you are not drowsy, I am: and we are getting out of mosquito land at last."

CHAPTER VIII.

ISABEL'S DREAM.

CAPTAIN CLEPHANE stretched himself upon the opposite seat, and was soon dreaming of Leicestershire fields and London drawing-rooms; but Isabel Gauntlett lay still, wide-eyed, her mind a chaos of vague regret over the past, wonder at the present, and eager anticipation of the future.

She felt physically weary, but her nerves were quivering with excitement and new-born energy. The lethargy which for months had stifled all youthful exuberance of spirits seemed now to have melted away like a cloud.

She was very young, scarcely more than twenty-one, yet a little while ago she had been face to face with death, and during her slow convalescence had almost persuaded herself that to be taken away would be the better part. But that mood had been born of sickness. What girl, however circumscribed her lot, wishes to die while the blood runs lustily in her veins?

Now, in this soft southern night, laden with aromatic fragrance, and filled with the murmur of hidden life, as she was whirled on through regions unknown, and suggestive of the wild and unexpected, Isabel Gauntlett felt her being revivified; and her heart panted with the longing of a girl who sees for the first time opening before her the world of romance and destiny.

She had led the chrysalis existence of an orphan, brought up under the roof of a half-sister, much older than herself, moving in the groove of respectable Philistinism, well-

married, and childless. Her surroundings had been those of a Devonshire manor-house, whose mistress was the lay rector and Lady Bountiful of the village, and she herself the lady's curate and aid-de-camp. Twice a year she had been taken to London to see the exhibitions and replenish her wardrobe, and she had visited at one or two country-houses. There her horizon closed.

She had been trained in a manner at which no one could have caviled. Lady Hetherington, in offering her sister a home, had determined to do her duty to the uttermost. She could not be expected to feel any absorbing affection for the child of a young and pretty step-mother, by whom she had been ousted from the command of her father's house; but when at twelve years old the little girl was left an orphan with a fortune of which the interest would barely suffice for the allowance of a young lady supposed to dress fashionably and to mix in county society, Lady Hetherington generously volunteered to defray educational expenses; and, as she was a woman with the strictest sense of duty, it is needless to say that, according to her lights, she fulfilled her obligations. Isabel had the best and most prosaic of governesses. Her intelligence was driven at a steady jog along the conventional path of feminine learning; and if her imagination sighed after bolder tracks or flowery meads, it was at least docile and answered to the bit.

Lady Hetherington intended that her sister should marry satisfactorily, and was disappointed when at nineteen Isabel's lungs were pronounced delicate, and she was debarred from even the Exeter ball. Lady Hetherington did not approve of Plymouth as a scene of mild dissipation, for it was a garrison town, and likely to harbor detrimentals. An unusually severe winter brought on a serious attack, and the London faculty declared that to restore the young girl to health it was absolutely necessary that she should spend a year in a warm climate. Lady Hetherington was perplexed. It was impossible that Isabel should go alone to Madeira or the South of France. Both she and Sir Richard had a horror of living abroad. He would not give up his shooting; he was master of the hounds; and then, without her, what would become of Heatherleigh? Besides, these would be but half measures. The doctors had advised a voyage across the equator. In her difficulty she bethought her of Jack Clephane, Isabel's maternal uncle, who had

emigrated to Australia ten years before, when he had found it impossible to balance income and expenditure in England, had married there, and was at this crisis obviously his niece's best protector. To his care, therefore, Isabel was consigned. She acquiesced listlessly in the arrangement. There were no sharp heart-wrenches, only a placid resignation which softened the shock of separation. Nevertheless at parting she clung to Lady Hetherington, and implored that she might be allowed to remain and die at home. But strength revived, and during the long days of dreamy convalescence at sea, her soul wandered back from the shadowy borders. Her imagination took wings and soared; and this new world to which she had come—this world of strange never-ending forest, teeming with new life and unfamiliar sounds, lighted by unknown stars, which were as jewels in God's coronal—seemed the materialization of those realms of fantasy in which during her illness her mind had roamed.

The night wore away. The murmur of insects was hushed, and the dingoes' doleful howl and curlews' plaintive crying ceased. The train glided on through an interminable aisle of gaunt trees, their foliage silver-white with dew. Isabel's eyes closed; she slept and dreamed—one of those curious vivid dreams which visit us when the brain is excited by new scenes. The motion rocked her gently, and she fancied herself in a boat floating upon the bosom of a broad and rapid river. She was not alone. A man was rowing the boat, but his back was toward her, and his face hidden. It seemed borne in upon her that though he was a stranger some inexplicable bond united them. The sun shone gloriously; little wavelets gleamed beneath its rays and leaped up joyously to kiss the drooping branches of crimson-blossomed trees that grew upon the banks. Isabel's bosom heaved with soft exhilaration. Oh! how beautiful life was! She felt a curious sense of expansion, of pure and perfect happiness, and would fain have held out her arms to embrace—she knew not what. Then creeping over her, came a vague trouble and wonder. The sky changed and darkened; the smiling day became gloomy night. Neither moon nor stars lightened the blackness. The river turned to an angry sea, the rising waves threatened to engulf the boat. "Oh, must I die!" cried Isabel to her dream companion; "and may I not see your face?"

In the darkness he turned and held out his arms and she crept into them and was soothed. The gloom hid his features, but she beheld his eyes, large and sad, but full of tenderness. He clasped her to his heart, and the trouble was stilled. "Is this love?" she asked. "Love is faith," he answered. She felt his kiss upon her lips, and in that thrill of exquisite joy she awoke.

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CHAPTER IX.

DROPPED AT THE SLIP-RAILS.

MORNING had dawned; and a pale pink glow suffused the eastern sky. The train was no longer in motion. An uncouth-looking guard standing by the door of the compartment was already unceremoniously throwing on the way-side such small articles of luggage as came to his hand.

"Stop, my friend!" cried Captain Clephane. "That dressing-bag is fitted up with silver and glass, and might be injured if it happened to strike against a gum-tree. Here, take my swag and pitch it where you choose; and there's a glass of grog for your trouble, and good-day to you! Now, Isabel."

The girl, flushed from the recollection of her dream, had risen in a dazed manner from her impromptu couch, and, having tied on her hat and descended from the carriage, gazed bewilderedly around her. Here were trees, trees, nothing but trees, except, indeed, a rough fence of split wood which lost itself among the thickening trunks. Her two portmanteaus lay forlornly on the grass. The train whizzed away, and Isabel realized that they had been dropped in this promiscuous fashion at the Gundalunda slip-rails.

"I thought that some of them would have been down to meet us," said Clephane. "I dare say they'll turn up presently. Just wait a minute, Isabel, while I drag this baggage through the fence, and then we'll walk along that track to the head station. It's no distance. I'll give a shout in case there's a black boy within hail."

A series of long melodious cooees echoed through the bush, but evoked no answering sound. While Clephane let

down the slip-rails and pulled the portmanteaus through, Isabel seated herself upon a fallen log and drank in the beauty and freshness of the early morning. A white mist clung to the gum-trees, silvering their dull green leaves and bringing out their aromatic fragrance. The grass lay low from its weight of dew, and the young green things looked grateful for the moisture, which would too soon be dried up. The forest was unlike any wooded ground Isabel had ever seen—the trees were so tall and straggling, the coloring so neutral, the herbage so sparse. Here were no green glades or flowery dells. Upon a slight rise a little distance off, an army of curious-looking grass-trees raised aloft their plumy tufts and brown spears; and there, just beyond the paddock-fence, two or three startled kangaroos lifted their fawn-like heads and bounded away toward a distant ridge.

They walked on under the dripping branches, and as sunrise reddened the sky, the vapors dispersed, and there awoke overhead a shivering twitter of little birds. Gradually the stir intensified. Cockatoos fly from bow to bow uttering discordant shrieks which almost drowned the magpie's liquid note, heard at its best in the early morning. The black cuckoo sent forth his metallic coo-eh. The laughing jackasses yelled out a mocking chorus; and the locusts commenced their monotonous whir.

They passed a herd of drowsy cattle, camped beneath a clump of wattles; these gazed with sleepy eyes but did not move. Now, an opossum scuttled to the shelter of a hollow tree, or a jew-lizard, perched upon some withered bow, erected its portentous-looking ruff and hissed menacingly.

A mile or more had been accomplished. The country began to look less wild. Here and there clearings had been made. Giant logs, covered with moss and fern, lay imbedded in the grass, corpse-like reminders to their still erect brethren—which, stripped of bark, stretched out gaunt gray arms as if imploring for grace—that they were awaiting a similar fate.

In the distance, faint rings of smoke curled to the sky; a cluster of cottages might be seen; and, on the other side of a fence they were skirting, was the stock-yard, of which the bristling posts and log-rails rose in the center of an oasis of couch-grass. From a gibbet at one corner hung suspended the carcass of a newly slaughtered beast. Close by, two huge iron pots raised upon erections of rough stone looked

like altars raised for the performance of heathen rites. The grinning faces, half-clad figures, and strange jabber of several aborigines who plied the fire beneath, were in keeping with the suggestion. There was something savage and picturesque about the scene. A flock of crows scenting carrion swirled and swooped in the air above the slain animal; and a crowd of curs of every description, from the sleek, well-bred kangaroo-hound to the hairless mongrel of the blacks' camp, surrounded the place of carnage, and appeared too well engaged to pay any attention to the new arrivals.

As they followed the fence to the slip-rails which gave admittance to the inner paddock, loud shouts, cooees, and cracking of whips, sounded in the rear. There was a stampede of horses past the yard, manes flowing, tails flying, nostrils distended. A stockman and a brace of black boys rounded the mob, while following at a more leisurely pace came two gentlemen. Yes, they were gentlemen, decided Isabel, whose discernment had been quickened even during her two days' residence in Australia. Though they were coatless, and brandished whips like the others, there was about both an easy air of command not to be mistaken.

Clephane cooeed. At sight of his neighbor and the English girl one of these riders spurred his horse to a brisk canter, and met his guests at the dividing fence. He dismounted, let down the slip-rails, and, cabbage-tree hat in hand, advanced toward Miss Gauntlett.

He looked shy and awkward. This was hardly surprising, for he was overwhelmed by the sudden consciousness that this dainty English lady had probably never before been received by a host similarly garbed in dirty moleskin nether garments, a Crimean shirt, collarless, open at the neck, and stained with blood—for, had she arrived a quarter of an hour earlier, he would have been discovered in the act of skinning the dead bullock—with such brawny bared arms, and so great a deficiency in polite phrases. He fancied there was a smile upon Isabel's lips. As a matter of fact she had never been remarkable for that fine perception of contrast in which we are told lies the true sense of humor; but a faculty is developed with the opportunity for its exercise, and she was certainly amused and struck by the novelty of her surroundings.

"Hullo, old fellow!" said Clephane. "Let me introduce my niece. Mr. Ferguson, Miss Gauntlet."

The master of Gundalunda stammered out some apologies. He thought the train must be earlier than usual. He had been on the point of riding down the paddock to meet it.

Isabel held out her hand, but found no suitable words in which to acknowledge the greeting. She was shy, too, and also interested in examining her host. Already her imagination had been stimulated by Clephane's reference to the love affair between Ferguson and Gretta Reay. Although her sensibilities were somewhat jarred by the roughness of his appearance, she was obliged to confess that he was a lover of whom any Australian maiden might justly feel proud—six foot two in his boots, and, unlike most colonially born men, muscular as a champion athlete. The red mounted to his brow as he caught her look, but the flush was not unbecoming to his bronzed face, with its honest gray eyes, straight features, tawny mustache, and expression of frank determination.

"I have been impressing upon my niece," continued Clephane, with his rather affected banter, "that we are not at all elaborate in our social arrangements hereabouts; and that the adjective which best describes Australian manners and customs is 'casual.' For example, when we expect lady visitors from England, accustomed to all the luxuries of European railway traveling, we don't send the brougham down to the station with a footman to open the door and a spring-cart for the imperials. We have 'em all, boxes and lady, dropped at the slip-rails of our paddock-fence. Our fair guest walks two miles over the dewy grass."

"Oh, come, it isn't more than a mile," earnestly exclaimed Ferguson; "and your sisters-in-law always say they like it."

"I dare say they do, and Miss Gauntlet also. Not a welcome," Clephane went on, tragically, "except from cockatoos and bandicoots; finally she sees the most primitive and unappetizing preparations for breakfast staring her in the face. It's naturalism of the purest kind, dear Ferguson—too pure, even, to suit the school of Zola. We march with the times, you observe, Isabel; but it's a little startling to the nerves of one brought up in the gilded haunts of civilization."

Isabel laughed somewhat hysterically, for she was tired; and Mr. Ferguson rejoined, good-humoredly, not quite knowing how far Clephane was in jest or earnest:

“He never loses an opportunity of chaffing me, Miss Gauntlett. But I am awfully sorry that you should have arrived in this forlorn way. I don’t know how to apologize sufficiently. We can’t help being a bit rough in the bush, you know, and I dare say you are startled. We quite meant to be at the slip-rails to break things easily to you, but the fact is, it’s killing-morning. We’re mustering just now; all the hands are busy; and a beast of a scrubber got out of the yard, and was over the river in no time. I’d have let him go if it hadn’t been for Mr. Reay, for she’s one of yours, Clephane—a poley cow, with the Tieryboo brand; and I must say that she doesn’t do credit to your stock-keeping.”

“A poley cow, branded with a star on the near shoulder?” excitedly cried Clephane. “God bless you, dear Ferguson, she’s the best-bred animal I’ve got on the run, and the wildest. Send her with the tailing-mob for a bit. I’ll go and have a look at her.”

“Uncle Jack,” pleaded Isabel, faintly, “are my trunks quite safe?”

“Bless me—yes. The cattle won’t eat them, and there’s nobody to prig them.”

“They shall be brought up directly, Miss Gauntlett,” said Ferguson.

Another gentleman, middle-aged, long-legged, spare, Scotch-looking, with sandy, grayish hair, a protruding upper lip, and a tendency to gesticulation, joined the group. He had walked from the stock-yard leading his horse, and now turned to the black boy, who was following him.

“Hi, Combo, fetch ‘em cart. Yan along a slip-rails. Bring up swag belonging to White Mary. Murra make haste. You’re welcome, Miss Gauntlett. You’ll be staying at my station, Doondi, for a bit now. You’ll find the bush rough after England, though I’ve almost forgotten what that’s like, for it’s forty-two years since I left it. I hope the climate ’ll restore your health. You don’t look to me so vara delicate; but all Australian girls are pale-faces, and they are mostly weeds, so you’ll show fair beside them. You’ll be tired. Ferguson, don’t let us be standing

here. You're wanted in the yards, and I'll take the young lady to Judith Blaize, who's looking out for her."

Mr. Reay jerked out his sentences with hardly a stop between them, but each word uttered deliberately, as though he were giving forth a series of statements which could not and should not be controverted. He then took possession of a hand-bag Isabel carried, and, while Ferguson diverged to the stock-yard, led the way to the homestead, walking like a pair of compasses, so long did his legs seem in proportion to his body. There was something quite comic in his impulsive decisiveness, and, if the phrase may be used, slow impetuosity.

"Well!" said he, "and what is going to be the upshot of this summer session?"

"Oh, I went to the House the other night. They were all snarling like a pack of hungry hounds. There'll be no adjournment for Christmas till the bone has been picked clean. The Government tried its strength and got so discomfited that the Opposition chief stopped in his triumph to pat poor old Mills of 'Works' on the back, and tell him he had fought like a man."

Mr. Reay chuckled with a delight he tried to conceal. "I won't go near 'em," he exclaimed. "Catesby turned tail on my Railway measure, and he shall fight for his Polynesian Bill without my help. When they're ready to put me into 'Works,' and uphold my Railway policy, I'll join him—not a day sooner."

"Catesby is magnificent," continued Clephane, "especially after he has come back from the Parliamentary refreshment bar. I must say that the *rationale* of winter sessions is very obvious; but is not the import duty on 'Jim Hennessy' and Martell's 'Three Stars' worth considering? Just think it over, Mr. Reay, in connection with the Free Trade question. I wish you had heard Catesby. This sort of thing"—and he struck an attitude and apostrophized the gum-trees: "'Fellow-countrymen, it is time to return to a moral, a rational, a pacific policy—not one of Intercolonial jealousy and suspicion; of arrogant claims for ascendancy; of bloodshed, bluster, and blow.' I assure you it was fine. But to drop politics, what is the news from Doondi?"

"Combo brought a letter from Sib this morning. Would ye like to hear it? That's my son, Sebastian, Miss Gaunt-

lett. Ye'll obsairve he does not waste words, in which respect he differs from one of his sisters. Here it is—I'll read it to you."

Mr. Reay opened out a large sheet of letter-paper, in the center of which were two lines of writing, and read aloud—

"DEAR FATHER,—All's well, except Billy the bull, which is dead of pleuro.

"Your affectionate son,

"SEBASTIAN REAY."

"That's important news, Jack, for it just means a hundred pounds out of my pocket, a bother with inoculating, and may be a delay in sending our cattle west. Here we are at the house, and there's Judith Blaize out among her chickens. She's a better hand at getting up than her husband. He's a puir creature, and she's clean daft about him; but there's no great harm in him; at least, I don't think so. I was just watchin' him yesterday pantin' and blowin' over a little spade fit for Jinks, and out she comes—while I was thinking, 'You're a thing to ca' yourself a man; and the work ye do is nae mair than a hen scrappit-in'—'Ducky darlin' now,' she says, 'the sun is hot, and ye mustn't work so hard; and now do-ant ye overtire yourself, ducky darlin'.' And stopping short, and waving one arm in a burst of energy, he exclaimed, 'If I was James Ferguson, by the Lord, I'd ducky darlin' him! But she is a good soul is Judith Blaize.'

CHAPTER X.

GUNDALUNDA.

GUNDALUNDA head-station was a queer dilapidated cluster of huts perched upon the slope of a gentle rise, from which might be seen a glorious expanse of rolling downs timbered with lightwood and iron-bark trees, and with a line of blue mountains showing in the distance. The principal building was of slab, roofed with sheets of bark fastened down by transversely placed saplings. Passion-fruit and vines closed in the veranda, which, less tasteful than that at Doondi, where the stands of plants were the joint care of Hester Murgatroyd and the Kanaka, was filled with squatters'

chairs and hammocks, while a canvas water-bucket dripped from the ceiling, and the wall was hung with stock-whips, spurs, and bridles. To the right of this building were two or three other tumble-down huts, presumably kitchen and outhouses; and to the left a trimmer cottage, the veranda of which gave indications of feminine occupation in the shape of a sewing-machine, and a basket full of unmade garments. A black gin leaned against one of the posts holding a pickaninny, smoking a short pipe, and spasmodically shredding the husks from a bundle of Indian corn. She was dressed in the discarded skirt of a white woman, fastened over one shoulder and under the other, leaving her lean arms classically bare. A crimson kerchief bound her woolly hair, and stuck in it were another pipe and half a fig of tobacco. A tame cockatoo superintended operations, running backward and forward between the ledge and the garden.

In this garden, fruit-trees, shrubs, flowers, and vegetables grew at random—cabbages side by side with brilliant exotic creepers, a trellis of vines sheltering a patch of mignonette. Here a bank of late purple irises, and there a *gloire de Dijon* rose strewing its creamy petals over a bed of artichokes.

As Mr. Reay opened the gate, the black gin set up a shrill jabber of salutation. “Yah, yah, wurra yee. Hi, Mussus. Budgery White Mary. My word cobbon budgery that fellow.” The cockatoo shrieked, “Who are you? what’s your name? The top of the morning to ye. Got a kiss for Polly?” while a stout lady, in a mushroom hat and lavender print-gown, who outside the garden-palings was scattering corn among a flock of roosters, turned and flew forward with a flutter and waddling movement not unlike the mode of progression of one of her own ducks. She was comely and fresh-complexioned, with aquiline features, blonde ringlets, and an expression of good-humored vivacity.

“Dear heart!” cried she, with a sprightly elevation of her eyebrows and innocent smile which corresponded with her child-like blue eyes, “I thought there’d have been a greater flourish of trumpets over your arrival, Miss Gauntlet, and you all the way from England, too! I’ll be bound if one of the Wyeroo miners’ wives had come to pay us a visit she’d have made herself heard half a mile off. And now tell me, what do ye think of Australia?”

Mrs. Blaize had a habit of putting comprehensive questions. Happily she never required an answer.

"She'll be in a better position to state her opinion, Judith, when you have taken her in and given her some tea," said Mr. Reay. "She has been traveling all night, and that isn't agreeable—at least I do—an't think so. If she slept it's more than I could do, supposing that my principles would permit me to make use of what I consider the ruination of the country."

"Dear heart, Duncan," said Mrs. Blaize, sweetly, "I can't think how it is, but you do remind me of an old uncle of mine who had softening of the brain when I was a girl, and who always fancied that he saw the Dardanelles out of his study-window. And when we ventured to suggest that the Dardanelles was in Turkey all he would answer was, 'The world is very censorious.' I suppose it is because you are so set against the railways; and I dare say you are right. But I must say that I think they are a great convenience in the way of fetching up stores. I mind the time when we were three months at Oreti Downs without flour and the bullock-drays stopped by flooded creeks! The tea is ready, and there are some beautiful scones fresh out of the oven. My old man is not very well this morning—a touch of lumbago from stooping over his gardenings; but you'll find everything you want, Captain Clephane, in Mr. Ferguson's room."

"And now, my dear," she exclaimed, when she had convoyed Isabel to a white boarded chamber, the drapery of which was spotless, and the window-frame wreathed by a long lilac thumbergia, and had with her own hands placed fragrant tea and steaming cakes before her guest, "you'll let me kiss you, won't you? I am aunt to your uncle's wife, so that you have a right to a corner of my heart. There's no one to oust you out of it. Those I love are sweet to me as spring flowers. Hester Murgatroyd puts me in mind of one of those limp creamy roses that never opens out its scented heart. Gretta is just a spray of wattle, a blossom of the Australian woods; but you I can liken only to a pale English snow-drop. Though I married when I was seventeen and went to live on Oreti Downs—where blacks, blight, and the scab among our sheep turned me into a hag before my time—I've many tender thoughts about my native land. By and by I'll tell you a few of my ex-

periences; and if the bush seems to you a little rough in these days you'll just compare it with the past and be thankful."

"I assure you," protested Isabel; but Mrs. Blaize did not allow her to proceed.

"You'll just be prepared to find us a dull, uncultivated set," she continued, dolefully shaking her head. "If any one should have an advantage it's myself, for I have been fortunate enough to marry a man who doesn't own many intellectual superiors. Not but what intellect has its drawbacks as you'll perhaps admit when you are introduced to my husband's brother; but he is just an example of sounding brass and tinkling cymbals, whereas my Mr. Blaize, being of a receptive nature, is slow to speech and full of wisdom. Now, tell me before I go, what do ye think of Australia?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Blaize," said Isabel, "if every one is as kind to me as the people I have already met, I shall never have a word to say against it; and, as for the bush, I think it perfectly delightful."

A great bell clanged in the larger house, and outside there was a sound of voices and of dogs barking.

"They are bringing down the meat," said Mrs. Blaize; "and I must go and pick out the best rounds for spicing. Ah, my dear, you'll find it true enough that the practicalities of Australian life nip the fragile buds of fancy before they have time to bloom. Since you really will not go to bed, I'll send your uncle for you when breakfast is ready, and he'll take you over to Mr. Ferguson's house."

Go to bed! upon that glorious summer morning, with a world full of wonders opening before her, and with that delicious feeling of new life and energy expanding her being! Isabel felt still a little bewildered, for a vision of the prim, well-ordered Heatherleigh household would keep obtruding itself before her imagination; nothing could be less in harmony with the free-and-easy arrangements at Gundalunda. She seemed to have been suddenly launched upon a voyage of discovery among people who thought, acted, and spoke differently from any other she had ever met.

When she was dressed, she seated herself by the window, which commanded a view of the paddock, and of a wider road than that which had brought her to the station. This was evidently the approach from the Wyeroo side—already

she had learned something of the topography of the Eura district. Along this road an excitable young man was just now riding toward the head-station. As he neared the paddock-fence he waved his hat and uttered an Irish yell, which set the curs barking and brought forth all the gins and pickaninnies from the blacks' camp on the other side of the slip-rails. The young man leaned over from his saddle, pitched something into the camp, for which warriors, gins, and pickaninnies played a game at grab, and indulged in some undistinguishable witticisms, whereat there were yells of aboriginal laughter and a gabbling chorus of gibberish. It was a pretty little Australian scene. The sun slanting through the tall gum-trees, the intensely blue sky overhead, smoke curling up from the gunyas, behind them the brilliant green of a paddock of young Indian corn, the swarthy forms of the blacks coiled upon their red blankets and opossum-rugs, the bits of crimson with which the women had adorned themselves, and the naked figures of the pickaninnies dancing round the fire in imp-like glee.

Isabel watched the young man ride round to the garden-fence, there unsaddle his horse, dash a bucket of cold water over the animal's back, turn him loose into the paddock, and deposit his saddle and bridle upon the edge of the veranda. At that moment the bell pealed again, and Captain Clephane's voice sounded at his niece's door.

Young Ferguson—fresh from his morning swim in the creek, with his straight features, his column-like throat, and the close tendrils of light hair fringing his forehead, the only portion of his face not copper-color—looked like the modern embodiment of some Greek demi-god resuscitated from the limbo of dead-and-gone mythology, and transplanted from classical regions to an Arcadia unconsecrated by tradition. He had removed all traces of stock-yard labor, and his spotless riding-breeches, blue-striped shirt, and light alpaca coat left nothing to be desired in the matter of costume. He held in his hand a half-blown rose; and, as Isabel Gauntlett entered, placed it beside her plate with an entire absence of self-consciousness, which rendered the act of gallantry less a tribute to the individual than a token of the homage so readily accorded by the typical Australian to a refined woman.

Underlying the rough-and-ready manners, and the prosaic routine of bush-life, there is an old-world chivalry,

a reverence for women, a purity of thought, a delicacy of sentiment, not always to be found in what Clephane called "the gilded haunts of civilization." This is partly due to the breezy moral atmosphere, and partly to the influence of books, which become living realities in the solitude and monotony of existence among the gum-trees. The typical Australian is an odd combination of the practical and the ideal. He is like a student who learns to read to himself a foreign language, but does not attain to its pronunciation. He has no knowledge of current jargon or society slang. He has unconsciously rejected vulgarisms and shallow conceits; but all the deeper thoughts—the poetry of life which appeals to the soul—he has made his own.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST DAY IN THE BUSH.

NOT that the conversation this morning gave evidence of either culture or romance.

Mrs. Blaize, presiding over the tea-pot, was impressing upon Mr. Ferguson the necessity for re-enforcing the herd of milkers. Mr. Reay, attacking his breakfast with the spasmodic solemnity which marked his speech and movements, was discussing the desirability of choosing, from the pastures of one Nash, a neighboring squatter, a successor to Billy the bull, deceased; and the young Irishman, introduced as Mr. Patrick Desmond, announced that he had not washed out gold enough that week to pay for his grub, and was thinking of turning drover again if he could get a job.

Said Mr. Reay, looking up suddenly from his plate, "Well, you can ride over to Doondi if you like, Desmond. We're sending our mob north-west in about three weeks' time; and, if you hear of another good hand with cattle, I don't mind letting him tail the weaners for a bit to see how he shapes."

"Sure, an' I'm your man," said Pat Desmond, with alacrity; "and I know a first-rate chap who was overlanding for Fyson in New South Wales, and turned up at Wyeroo with his swag and five shillings in his pocket; and that was all he had in the world, barring his revolver; and for why? but that thief, old Fyson, had gone smash and

never paid him a penny. He took a billet in the Great Phoenix, and is about as sick of the diggings as I am. Anyhow, Mr. Ferguson, I've sent my mate to prospect for a new claim, and it's after lending a hand at the mustering that I'll be if you want me, and if you don't, I'll be glad of a spell."

"Spell as long as you like, Pat," said Ferguson. "I've got to camp on the other side of the run, I'm sorry to say; so if you'll show Miss Gauntlett about the place, and help her to pass the time, I sha'n't feel so guilty in leaving her."

Mr. Patrick Desmond, who was a good-looking, dark-haired youth, with a ruddy complexion, and a twinkle in his blue eyes, turned to Isabel, beside whom he was seated. "And isn't it the job that suits me entirely, Miss Gauntlett? And it isn't to a Gundalunda scrubber that I'll be making my bow while I'm here. I'm a sort of cousin of Mrs. Blaize's, and by that token of reasoning I'm your cousin too. Anyway, I'm at your orders. And how's your husband, Mrs. Blaize?"

"Indeed, and my old man is but poorly," rejoined that lady; "and he is having his breakfast in bed. He says he doesn't like it, but ye know that isn't true; for give him a book and he is happy, whether he is in a horizontal position or a perpendicular one. The thing he doesn't like is being dosed and coddled. But I tuck him up and wrap a little shawl round him, and he is just obliged to submit. I never had him in such good order, for let me assure you he is not a man to be dictated to by a woman." She heaved a deep sigh, and taking advantage of the pause Mr. Pat Desmond broke in. It seemed to Isabel that almost everybody at Gundalunda was fond of hearing the sound of his or her own voice, and that the stranger within their gates—or rather their slip-rails—was under no obligations to be politely garrulous.

"I say, Mr. Ferguson, there's one thing that Miss Gauntlett ought to do. We must drive her over to Wyeroo in iligant style, and take her down the Great Phoenix."

But Mrs. Blaize's tongue, once set in motion, was not to be lightly checked.

"There's disappointments in all earthly plans, Miss Gauntlett," she said. "My husband was formerly a clergyman; and if it hadn't been for his love of reading he'd

have remained a respected minister of the Gospel, instead of being what he is. If you ever think of settling in Australia, don't marry a parson, or, if ye do, keep atheistical books out of his reach, for they'll just thrust you out of a comfortable cure of souls and lead ye a dance up into the Never Never country, where but for James Ferguson's kindness we should be now." Mrs. Blaize uttered the above in a rapid and tragic aside, keeping one eye shut while she talked. "Here's my brother-in-law!" she added; "I call him 'Old Gold,' because he is so yellow. Pat, we're just snuffed out by these intellectual people. Move a little closer to me. Well, Gustavus, and how did you sleep last night?"

Mr. Gustavus Blaize was lean, shriveled, and dyspeptic-looking. His face resembled that of a mummy animated by a pair of bilious eyes, which nevertheless glowed at times with the ardor peculiar to impressionable and enthusiastic dispositions. They rested admiringly upon Isabel, in whose direction he executed an elaborate bow. He had an alert way of jerking up his chin, and spoke in high-pitched melancholy tones.

"But passably, thank you, Sister Judith. My enemy returned at four o'clock this morning"—he laid his hand pathetically upon the lower portion of his waistcoat. ("It's the coats of the stomach," explained Mrs. Blaize, in parenthesis.) "But I kept him at bay by swallowing draughts of scalding tea; and, as I sat groaning at my window, my pain was alleviated by the sight of Miss Gauntlet"—another bow—"appearing like Aurora with the dawn."

"Old fool!" observed Mrs. Blaize, in an audible *sotto voce*. "The sun was well up when you arrived. He's at his favorite game, Pat; and if Miss Gauntlet stays here a week he'll be making her an offer of marriage. You need not look so embarrassed, my dear—he is very deaf and can't hear a word I say; but he wouldn't acknowledge it for the world. Don't encourage him—a lean, dilapidated broom-handle with a lump of brains at the top. I'm not denying that he has talent; it runs in the family. But Gustavus is not to be compared to my husband, who is just a very remarkable man."

The men of business at the other end of the table rose. They had paid but little attention to the more frivolous

chatter, having been too much absorbed in a discussion concerning the poley cow aforementioned. Mr. Ferguson came round and shook hands with Isabel.

"Miss Gauntlet, I am ashamed of having talked shop before you. We generally make a point of keeping cattle in the background when ladies are present; but just now I am finishing up my mustering, and have to start off for the other side of the run. I must say good-bye, for I'm afraid my calves won't get branded while I do the honors of the station. I shall place you in charge of Mr. Gustavus Blaize and Pat Desmond, who have only to consider how to amuse you."

He hurried off.

"Miss Gauntlet," cried Pat, "isn't it a gold mine, now, that it'll please you to see? We'll spin you over to Wyeroo in no time at all."

"Let me recommend for to-day a hammock slung in some sequestered corner of the veranda," said Mr. Gustavus Blaize, magniloquently, "so that the soul may revel in dreamy sympathy with Nature, and the sensitive ear attune itself to new harmonies. But Miss Gauntlet has but to express a wish, and her faithful servants will endeavor to gratify it."

"Uncle Jack," exclaimed the young girl, "why didn't you prepare me for this sort of enchantment? Are there any more slaves of the ring?"

"Yes; I shall leave Combo at your disposal, and I should not be surprised if King Comongin turned up in all his war-paint to do homage to you as the representative of 'big fellow white Mary a long a water,' otherwise Her Gracious Majesty."

"Who is King Comongin?"

"Mr. Reay's henchman, sheltered by him from the arm of the law. By the way," added Captain Clephane, turning to his father-in-law, "there's no doubt that Comongin was the murderer of Royds. Hill, of the native police, says he knows it as a fact, and will send you the papers which prove it. You'll have to turn him off Doondi."

Mr. Reay's upper lip went down.

"I've said he should go if it was proved that he speared Royds; but I kept out of the way of asking questions. Comongin has had his grub from me for five years, and his tribe have never done me a hand's-turn of mischief. It's

my opinion that if the blacks are treated fairly they'll treat you likewise. Come along, Clephane. There's Combo with the horses. We had better be starting for Nash's. You'll keep an eye on that drover, Desmond. It's surprising what good men one sometimes picks up at the diggings."

"Ah," said Mrs. Blaize, shaking her head sympathetically, "there's many a gentleman's son at Wyeroo that has no business to be in such company—honorables and esquires are as thick as cedar-berries. I'd like to start a reformatory for all the ne'er-do-weels in Australia."

"You'd have your hands full, Judith," retorted Mr. Reay, grimly. "Better restrict yourself to the conversion of the blacks. And how is it that you find yourself at liberty, Mr. Gustavus Blaize? I thought you were due at Preston this week."

"Sure!" answered Mr. Desmond, "and will not Mr. Gustavus be too valuable a servant to the country for him to be let run into danger? Haven't you heard the news, Mr. Reay? There's one of the New South Wales bush-rangers that has crossed the border, and was after sticking up the Preston mail a few days ago. A digger I was speaking to told me he'd fallen in with him, and that he is a daring fellow, and will be after taking Ned Kelly as his model. There'll be a ruction on the Eura one of these days; and 'deed then Mr. Gustavus had better write to the colonial secretary, and ask for an escort of mounted police."

Whereupon there were expressions of incredulity and some mild banter. The party dispersed. Mr. Reay and Captain Clephane cantered down the paddock, and from the veranda, James Ferguson, at the head of a retinue of stockmen, black boys, and dogs, might be seen jogging across the plain; the white shirts of the men, the gaudy handkerchiefs which girt the waists of the black boys, and the roll of crimson blankets strapped to each saddle-bow, making vivid patches among the lines of tree-stems.

Mrs. Blaize departed, intent upon household cares, and the three remaining betook themselves to a bowery corner of the veranda, where the vine-leaves cast quivering shadows upon the boards, and purpling grapes hung temptingly, where bright-eyed lizards darted in and out of the crevices, and tiny birds flew out from their nests under the bark

eaves; while innumerable insects kept up a pleasant buzz, and a light breeze swept in from the garden, laden with rich perfumes. Isabel lay back in a squatter's chair, and yielded herself to the sense of dreamy enjoyment which crept over her.

"And if Mr. Durnford was here, he'd be after writing a poem on you," said young Desmond, gazing at her with frank admiration as he leaned against a veranda-post opposite. "You wouldn't think it, perhaps, Miss Gauntlett, but it's a sentimental kind of chap that I am, and I am fond of poetry. Durnford's things give me a creepy feeling down the spine. 'Deed and it's a queer feeling, and nothing else has ever given it to me, barring Miss Gretta Reay's singing. That's because his poetry has the true Australian ring, I suppose. It's like summer nights, with the stars shining over the mountains, and the lilies asleep on the lagoon, and all the wild sounds turned into music. It would be like Miss Gretta av it wasn't that she is like no one but just herself. And I had better make a clean breast of it, Miss Gauntlett, and tell you at once I have been in love with her."

"You have been in love, with Miss Reay, Mr. Desmond?" repeated Isabel.

"Deed, then, that's all over. It's Jinks now that is queen of my soul. It wouldn't be for myself to run in the same race with Mr. Ferguson. Besides, I haven't any business to be falling love. I'm only a poor beggar of a new chum with an allowance of £80 a year, bad luck to it. But sure and I'm always after the same old game. I'm as bad as Gustavus Blaize, that has asked every girl in the district to marry him. Now don't you be making a handle of that against me, Miss Gauntlett, and I'll tell you what—I'll promise not to get spoony on you if you'll consent to be my friend. Will you now?"

"Willingly," answered Isabel, laughing, "to avoid the alternative."

Pat Desmond laughed too. "All right, Mr. Blaize," to that gentleman, who approached from the inner room with a book in his hand. "Fire away! What have you got there?"

"If you'll permit me, Miss Gauntlett, I'll read you something of Durnford's."

"I should like it very much, Mr. Blaize,"

Mr. Blaize turned over the leaves of his book, eying Isabel sentimentally at the same time.

“ You come from Devonshire, Miss Gauntlett?”

“ Yes,” returned Isabel.

“ It is a beautiful country,” said Mr. Blaize. “ During my last visit in England I spent some days with a friend in, I believe, your neighborhood. Devonshire is famous—”

“ For apples and cider,” put in Pat.

“ For the beauty of its women,” gallantly remarked Mr. Blaize. “ I believe that I heard your brother-in-law’s name in connection with the fox-hounds.”

“ He’s the master,” said Isabel. “ He likes hunting and shooting.”

“ John Bull all out,” put in Pat. “ But fire off, Mr. Blaize.”

“ You have heard of Mr. Durnford, our Eura poet, Miss Gauntlett?” said Gustavus.

“ No,” said Isabel; “ only what Mr. Desmond has just told me.”

“ He is tutor to the young Reays; but I rejoice to learn that his genius will find play in a wider arena. In confidence, it was through my representation that he was offered the sub-editorship of the ‘ Leichardt Lands Review.’ This is a paper to which I occasionally contribute, for I consider it a duty to elevate as far as possible the literary tone of the Australian colonies.”

“ Hear the ould fool, now!” murmured Pat.

“ In fact I am one of the proprietors of the ‘ Review,’ ” continued Mr. Blaize, magnificently. “ This book was published in Melbourne anonymously a year ago. It made a stir. I read it, and admired it. Several coincidences struck me. After a time I became convinced that it could only have been written by some one living on the Eura. My suspicions pointed to the right man, and I made known my discovery in the pages of ‘ The Review.’ Mr. Durnford resented what he was pleased to term my interference. I, on the contrary, consider that I have rendered a service to society and to literature. A mystery is a wrong to the community; when I scent one I feel it my duty to unearth it. Don’t you agree with me, Miss Gauntlett?”

“ No, Mr. Blaize,” warmly retorted Isabel; “ I should not like to look upon myself as a social detective. But

then, I'm a woman, and one doesn't want to argue about moral questions on a day like this. Please begin reading."

Mr. Gustavus turned over the pages and cleared his throat. "In this poem," said he, by way of prologue, "Australian nature is depicted under the guise of a woman. She is vaguely discontented with her own savage beauty. She has a dim perception of something higher. There is within her bosom a warring of the earthly and the spiritual. Her half voluptuous yearning toward the genius of art in the form of a star draws toward her the star spirit. She worships him at first in sensuous ecstasy, at last with the pure adoration of an awakened soul. All this is set forth in the passionate language of one who, if he has not loved, at least dreams vividly of love."

Mr. Gustavus Blaize's sullen face became for the moment transfigured by the influence of reflex emotion. His really fine eyes glowed, and his voice vibrated with an enthusiasm which was in the present instance unaffected. He read well, and delighted in exhibiting the accomplishment; it would have rendered a young Adonis irresistible.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. BLAIZE'S REMINISCENCES.

PATRICK DESMOND was right. Durnford's poem had the true Australian flavor. These wild, ardent notes rang in unison with the rushing of flooded rivers, the sighing of sheoaks, the plaintive wailing of curlews, and with the weird cries which haunt the Australian bush. They suggested moonlit mountain-peaks, measureless expanse of plain and forest, and gleaming southern skies. They had never been struck in harmony with the twittering of sparrows, the trilling of nightingales, or the murmur of a gentle breeze rustling through the foliage of spring-clad woods. There was nothing in them of green fields, yellowing corn, garden-like landscape. They described Australia—and Australia only.

In this speciality of the source of inspiration, and in a certain transcendental passion, which seemed to oscillate between earth and heaven—sometimes sensuous and sometimes spiritual—lay the peculiar fascination of the poem.

In other respects its originality was of the stereotyped kind. There was the note of rebellion against accepted beliefs in religion and morals; the pagan worship of form; the ring of Comtism; the almost exaggerated adoration of woman, which is associated with the modern "cult." It might be doubted whether Mr. Durnford possessed that large-souled enthusiasm which makes the undying poet. But, if his capacity for passion were restricted to one phase, that was at least vividly expressed.

"Very good, very good!" bleated a melancholy voice in the garden. "You read well, Gustavus. I remember the time when you thought of going in for parlor recitation. I always think myself, that to recite well is an enviable accomplishment."

A copy-book platitude was Mr. Blaize's invariable anti-climax. He smiled as though he had made a profound statement. Isabel looked up. She saw a little wizened figure, with a massive head, contemplative eyes, a meek mouth, and soft gray hair. Mr. Blaize looked very old—considerably older than his brother, whom he resembled—but the face was sadder, less acrid, and not so alert as that of the Government Inspector.

With one hand he supported a large green umbrella, covered with white calico; in the other he carried a little bunch of roses and sweet-scented verbena, at which, every now and then, he sniffed with apparent pleasure. He bade Isabel welcome with gentle cordiality; looked at her for a moment or two with a wistful expression in his eyes, sighed softly, then wandered into the garden, and, folding up his umbrella, occupied himself in pruning an ill-kempt rose-bush or thinning a bunch of grapes. At intervals he would draw forth a book from his pocket, and, seating himself, would read intently for a few minutes, then proceed again with his work.

Mrs. Blaize had established herself during the reading before her sewing-machine, and now watched her husband with evident and touching solicitude, uttering every now and then some remark of a tender, expostulatory kind, which called forth the baldest response.

It struck Isabel that there was a peculiar pathos in the attitude of this couple. The pathos was that of commonplace life and character, which appeals less forcibly to our sensibilities, perhaps because we meet it at every street cor-

ner and in every homely existence that comes into contact with our own. The wistful affection of the wife, in which there was an element of comicality, suggesting the flutter of a well-feathered hen, contrasted sharply with the melancholy apathy of the husband. Why must our sympathy be always ready on demand for youth and beauty in distress, and why should there be so little to spare for the middle-aged and unlovely? Kind-hearted Mrs. Blaize, with her petty sentimentalities, her garrulous tongue, her blonde curls, and her fifty years, had her own world of romance and of secret care. Profoundly loving her husband, she nursed in her bosom the bitter consciousness that but affectionate toleration was awarded her in return. Her tears fell frequently, mingling with the spice and saltpeter which made her rounds so excellent, and with the water which washed her butter. Her childless condition was to her a cause for mourning; and, also, when she read her Bible, being a devout woman and an implicit believer in the book of Genesis, she grieved that her husband had cast away his faith in a personal and beneficent Creator, and had abandoned the vocation unto which he had been called.

Mr. Blaize's falling away dated from the sudden death by drowning of his only child—a daughter by his first wife, to whom he had been devotedly attached. From that time he had become a changed man. He no longer cared to work. He refused to visit or to preach; and would have drifted quietly to the grave had it not been for his wife's pathetic reproaches and his nephew's kindness in giving him a home. He had lived in James Ferguson's employment for several years; and it must be stated that Mrs. Blaize's efficiency as a housekeeper amply atoned for any short-comings on the part of her husband.

She clung to a belief in his superior intelligence, but upon what grounds she based her opinion a stranger would have found it difficult to determine. It was not upon record—in the Eura district—that Mr. Blaize had ever uttered an original observation: and, though he read incessantly, his learning did not, as was the case with his brother, bear fruit in the shape of quotation or argument. Sometimes, when pacing the garden-walks in the company of his wife's nieces, after a long silence he would halt and turn with a bird-like eagerness which seemed to indicate the birth of a new idea, and then Gretta would hold herself expectant. But no;

“I always think myself,” he would remark, and here pause deliberately, “I always think myself—that some flowers are particularly fragrant,” whereupon Gretta would laugh hysterically; and it became the custom at Doondi to preface the most obvious platitude with, “As Mr. Blaize would say I think myself,” etc.

Later in the day Mrs. Blaize’s secret sorrow found vent. She and Isabel were sitting alone in the veranda, Patrick Desmond and “Old Gold” having betaken themselves to bathe in the creek. Dusk was falling; a cool wind swept up over the downs. The milkers were lowing on their way to the yard: the fowls were leisurely seeking their roost. Mrs. Blaize stitched assiduously at a pair of riding-breeches she was fashioning, till the light failed her, casting every now and then a tender glance toward her husband, who still hovered over his rose-bushes. She let her hands fall upon her lap, and began to talk.

“I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry when I look at my old man. Observe him now, weeding the lawn in that coat. For all the world he might be a hen sitting upon a nest of addled eggs. Well, his eggs are addled—that’s about the long and short of it. I wish you could have seen him as he used to be before his daughter died. I sometimes wonder, in all reverence, my dear, whether the Almighty just realizes His responsibilities in dealing with us human beings. When ye think of what a small thing would have made all the difference to one of us, and have been nothing at all to Him, it’s hard to see why it shouldn’t have been given. Most people have a right to expect that the laws of nature won’t pass them by, but it seems as though that was too much to ask. It’s a sad thing for a woman when she has no little ones of her own to love. I don’t give a mother much credit for keeping herself clear from the pitfalls of life; but there’s a deal of credit in living respected and doing nothing much amiss when there are no soft arms to hold you tight back from mischief. And it’s a sad thing, and a bitter thing,” continued the old lady, “when you feel that, by bearing your husband bairns, you might have made up to him for the great grief of his life.”

There was a little pause, during which Mrs. Blaize wiped away a tear and Isabel watched Mr. Blaize, reflecting that a love which could encircle that gray head with a halo of

romance must be indeed powerful. It was borne in upon her for the first time that the old as well as the young have their heart-dramas; and she wondered that, with all these under-currents of sentiment flowing in unexpected places, life could ever seem prosaic.

"It is children who keep human hearts green," continued Mrs. Blaize. "There's poor Hester Murgatroyd, worse than a widow at eighteen. If her child had lived she would have been flesh and blood instead of the queer dreamy creature she is now."

"Is Mrs. Murgatroyd cold, then?" asked Isabel.

"Cold!" echoed the old lady; "starved, petrified, my dear. And what would you have? Better be a marble woman than love too late. She had her disappointment, and now she looks upon every man as a brute, and lives in her books. She is the most unpractical creature, and it's a mercy that Gretta shows a taste for housekeeping. You'll admire Gretta. She's a taking creature, with just a look of birth and breeding that fits in somehow with her flightiness. But that is not surprising, for her mother and my first husband were O'Haras, and Duncan Reay has good blood in his veins for all that he began life as a shearer. Ah, my dear, there's strange ups and downs in Australia. If I were just to tell you a few of my experiences in the early days at Oreti Downs!"

"Oh, pray do, Mrs. Blaize!" exclaimed Isabel; and the old lady began the monologue, which conversation was apt to become when she took part in it.

"That was the name of my first husband's station. It was just on the borders of civilized country. All beyond was unexplored, except by blacks, and they were so savage that the first thing Mr. O'Hara taught me was how to use a gun. I became a capital shot, and the blacks used to say 'That fellow White Mary cobbon saucy. Plenty bong, gun along a that fellow.' I was a girl not as old as you when I came out with my husband, and was brought up in a sober English village, I dare say much as you have been brought up."

Isabel leaned sympathetically forward, and her eager questions interrupted the flow of Mrs. Blaize's reminiscences.

"Yes, I once killed a black fellow. Don't talk of it; the thought lies like lead on my soul. I feel that I can't

do enough to Christianize the poor creatures, as a sort of atonement. It was the only thing to do. I was alone. There wasn't even a Chinaman about the place, and Mr. O'Hara was counting sheep, fifteen miles off." Mrs. Blaize shuddered. "Counting the sheep was a great business," she resumed; "it had to be done at sundown and, of course, night had always set in before my husband returned. . . . No, I was never very frightened; but, if I thought there were any blacks about, I used to shut the doors as well as I could, call the dogs, and walk round the house with my pistol. You see we had no proper fastenings to our shutters, and no panes of glass; and, sitting in the light, I should have been such a good target for a spear—

"Upon one occasion, when Mr. O'Hara was absent, Ah Sing, a Chinese shepherd, whom we had turned into a cook, rushed in to me, trembling like a leaf. 'Missee!' he whispered, 'me see muchee black man. All come round outside kitchen.'

"There they were—an army of them—naked, tattooed creatures, very quiet, as blacks are when they mean mischief. Yes. I was frightened then; but to show that I was so would have been death—or worse. I took my gun and gave a pistol to Ah Sing, but he shook so that he couldn't hold it; then I went out and boldly pointed the muzzle at one of the two foremost. 'You yan,' I said, as impressively as I could. 'Ba'al you sit down a long a humpy to-night.' The wretches seemed to hesitate. One of them raised his spear. I put my finger on the trigger of my gun, ready to fire. He saw that I was in earnest and dropped the spear, and presently they all moved away. Oh, it's very easy to cow the blacks; they have a terror of fire-arms.

"There was a great deal that was amusing in the life, rough as it was; but after I had been four years at Oreti Downs I felt a perfect craving to speak to a woman. I had not seen one since my arrival, and I used to lie awake at night planning how I could get to the nearest township where Mr. Blaize and his wife lived, and that was nearly two hundred miles off. At last my husband and I started on our long ride. I shall never forget the first night we camped out—the clear sky above us with all its wonderful stars; the strange sounds, and the loneliness and bigness of

the bush. It gave me quite an eerie feeling. My dear, the story of that ride would take hours to tell. Little did I think then that I should ever be married to the man I was going to visit. At his house I saw, for the first time, my brother-in-law Gustavus Blaize, who had just married the most beautiful creature I ever beheld. For her sake I have always kept up a tender feeling toward 'Old Gold,' but he is too full of self-conceit for my taste. They had only been a few months out from England, and she was just a glory of lace and fine linen. She laughed at my outlandish dresses, and did up my hair in the style she wore her own. I used to have beautiful hair," and unconsciously Mrs. Blaize touched her yellow-gray curls. "She took my gowns to pieces and made them up anew; and we danced, sung, rode, and walked, and were as happy as a pair of school-girls.

"The next time I saw her was at Oreti Downs, where she came to pay us a visit with her husband—and a bath. I remember the bath well, for it seemed such an odd thing to travel about the bush with. They stayed for three months, and, as far as she was concerned, might have stayed forever, but he was lazy and cowardly and full of fine talk—in fact the most aggravating person to have in the house, for when he was stuffed he was thirsty, and as soon as his thirst was quenched he wanted to be stuffed again. While we were singing over our tubs and making merry at our baking he would sit in the veranda with his book and a glass of brandy. My dear, I'll tell you in confidence that it's brandy that ruined his liver and killed his wife; he has seen the folly of his ways and amended them, but it's true, and brandy has a deal to answer for in Australia. There he would sit sipping his grog, and crying out 'Oh, this is rural! This is idyllic! This is truly poetic! This is a life worth living!' But when there came an alarm of blacks he would let me go to the front with his gun, and hide himself till it was over. . . . But, my dear Miss Gauntlett, I've let my tongue run away with me; times have changed since then. My old man has gone in, and here are the fencers for their rations. They'll be pleased to hear that a bullock has been killed, after having lived on salt-junk for a month."

CHAPTER XIII.

WYEROO DIGGINGS.

“Now then, now then! Roll up for the diggings. Who is for the Wyeroo deep sinkings, where all the best gold is found? Take you twelve miles for half a crown, gentlemen; a cheap ride and a good one. Take you for eighteen pence. Take you for nothing, sir, but the pleasure of your company and whatever you choose to give me.”

The scene was a rough township, which might have been at the other end of nowhere, so desolate and uninhabited was the surrounding region, limestone ridges rising out of flat eucalyptus-grown country, stony pinches covered with grass-trees—sure indication of unprofitable soil, bolder mountains in the background; and here, where the Gundalunda buggy had halted to water and refresh the horses, a cluster of bark huts, a low railway-shed dignified by the name of terminus, and a dirty uninviting-looking tent, surmounted by a placard on which was printed in crooked letters “The Dead Finish Restaurant.”

The train had just steamed on. Before “The Dead Finish” one of Cobb’s coaches was drawn up, and upon the boot a man was seated, dressed digger-fashion, with a dirty cabbage-tree hat and a bowie-knife stuck in his belt, gesticulating wildly with his arms and holding forth inducements to the undecided or unwary to take their places for the Wyeroo deep sinkings.

A little band of third-class passengers, carrying valises and blankets, some with pickaxes, and all with the inevitable pint-pot and tin billy, hurried from the terminus to the coach. Some of the men took their seats at once; others, evidently bushmen, hesitated, half-turned away; and finally, seduced by the blandishments of the guard, tossed up their blankets, and clambered into the clumsy vehicle, which rattled off over the stony road, the driver turning his head and proposing a race with the buggy.

“Sure, and ’tisn’t much we mind giving ye the start, for we shall catch you up on the sandy flat,” derisively shouted Patrick Desmond.

Easily done. The coach-horses were lean and the coach

was heavy. The sparkling Gundalunda team of four sped over the level ground, and made light of the hills, which grew steeper and more numerous as they advanced, for they were approaching the mountainous district of the Upper Eura. Mr. Gustavus Blaize handled the reins, and now that the way had become more difficult, was debarred from casting back those tender glances at Miss Gauntlet which had been more than once intercepted by Mrs. Blaize, and had called forth the wrathful ejaculation, "Old fool!" Isabel perceived that no one appeared to regard Old Gold's amorous proclivities as anything but an immediate nuisance, and did not allow herself to be discomposed thereby. On the whole it was a merry drive. Mrs. Blaize's tongue never ceased wagging about nothing in particular, and Patrick Desmond kept up a running fire of Irish would-be witticisms, holding himself all the time in readiness to jump down whenever a fallen log impeded progress, or a leader showed signs of restiveness as a startled wallabi crossed the path or a herd of kangaroo bounded by.

It was wild country. The road slanted down ridges, crossed steep gullies and threaded rocky gorges, where grew delicate ferns, native hoyo, the blue sarsaparilla, and beautiful scarlet kennedia. Now they entered a dense scrub where perpetual twilight reigned, while strange dank creepers twined the ghostly trunks of the bottle-trees, and the clearings seemed like vast cathedral aisles. Here the air was steamy and the stillness oppressive; but, once more out in the open, a warm breeze fanned the long-bladed grass, locusts whirred, and birds and insects held jubilee.

Presently the hills were dotted with slab dwellings and low lines of tents. Trees had been cut down. In the gullies were holes hollowed by the gold-seekers; while here and there great heaps of earth and mullock, and unsightly erections for crushing quartz, indicated the whereabouts of a claim.

The buggy rattled down a long straggling street lined with zinc-roofed sheds, stores, and weather-board shanties, and beyond the town, on to a billowy plain full of deserted holes, in the center of which a solitary Chinaman was watering his little garden, and after the patient habits of his nation was making a livelihood out of the workings abandoned by more adventurous Europeans.

The buggy stopped at a little way-side inn close by; the

horses were taken out, some drinkables purchased, and Mrs. Blaize's well-provided luncheon-basket unpacked beneath the shade of a great apple-tree gum, not far from the Chinaman's garden. When they had reached the dessert stage the ancient Celestial, in his blue smock and wearing a pigtail, came forth bearing flat-stone peaches, guavas, and a water-melon, which he laid for sale before the strangers. He lingered while they eat the juicy fruit, and shook his head over the badness of times.

"My makee garden," he whined. "Before time, ten year ago, my makee plenty money. Just now, oh! too muchee man makee garden—plofit velly little. Diggings here no count. In New South Wales, diggings tai yat for Chinaman. Here, no Chinaman. My velly lonely."

"True for you; a boy is always lonely till he has got a wife," said young Desmond. "You should marry, John."

"Mally!" shrieked the Chinaman. "What for my mally? My no fool—oh! No mally European woman. Englishee woman no good."

And with a glance of contempt at the two ladies John stalked away, carrying his guavas with him.

"There's one for you, Miss Gauntlett," said Desmond. "And that's the Great Phœnix that ye see over there. The shaft is on the hill-side, by all those heaps of mullock. You can hear the buzz of the machinery and the roar of the blasting. Come, Mrs. Blaize—sure it's only two hundred feet down in a cage—nothing of a journey."

"Not I," said Mrs. Blaize, stoutly. "Here I shall stay, and discuss the marriage question with John Chinaman; and I think, Gustavus," she added, in a louder key, "that you had better follow my example, and profit by Asiatic wisdom. Don't you go running after Englishee women."

"Listen, Judith," began Mr. Gustavus, in that grandiloquent tone which announced a quotation—

"He who bends to himself a joy
Does the wingèd life destroy.
But he who kisses a joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise."

I kiss as it flies, or rather delves—excuse the far-fetched metaphor—the joy of accompanying Miss Gauntlett into the recesses of the Great Phœnix mine."

Everybody laughed. Isabel had blushed a little, but she

was beginning to see that blushes were too high a compliment to pay the Australian "chaff." She grew nervous at the thought of Lady Hetherington's dismay, could she have been present, and was relieved when Mrs. Blaize created a diversion by sending young Desmond after the Chinaman and his basket of guavas.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MINER BRADDICK.

ISABEL, Desmond, and Mr. Gustavus walked to the mouth of the shaft.

The manager's time, the mine, the men, were placed at Miss Gauntlett's disposal. Some hurried orders having been given, the party took their seats in a queerly constructed cage, and found themselves descending into the bowels of the earth. The cage swayed to and fro; there was a sense of oppression and suffocation. Mr. Gustavus coughed and groaned.

"Oh, my enemy!" cried he, tragically.

"Is it the devil that Mr. Gustavus Blaize has got in his inside?" Jinks Clephane always asks," said Mr. Desmond, aside to Isabel. "'And av it's the devil,'" she says, "'he'd better be whopped like father whops me.'"

The cage touched the bottom. A miner standing on one side handed each a lantern. The man was evidently known to Patrick Desmond, for he nodded:

"How's yourself, old fellow? I'll be after having a word with you by and by."

The miner did not answer, but held back, letting them pass on into a narrow passage tunneled in the reef. Then he followed at the distance of several paces. The dark walls closed them in like the sides of a tomb. Every now and then, a gleam from one of the lanterns revealed a trickle of moisture, or a brightly veined seam of quartz. The air was stifling. Their footsteps fell with a dull noise, and their voices echoed strangely. The only other sound to be heard was the distant thud of pickaxes at work.

The manager walked in front as guide. Isabel and her two squires, abreast, came next. She tried to widen the distance as much as possible, for her position was embarras-

sing to a young lady conventionally brought up. On one side, Old Gold, his sense of hearing deadened, bawled elaborate compliments in the intervals between his stumbles; on the other, Patrick Desmond poured into her ear a stream of under-toned comment.

“The English snowdrop will ere long be changed into a bright-hued exotic,” said Mr. Gustavus, concluding some inquiries concerning Isabel’s health with an allusion to her recent transplantation.

“Faith then, and it’s the potting of ye he’d like to be having,” whispered Pat. “Miss Gauntlett, I’ll be beforehand with him. Your room in my heart will be kept nice and warm, well swept and dusted. It’s a sky-parlor on the right side of the throb.”

“Poor little flower!” tenderly observed Old Gold, falling at the moment over a heap of rubbish. But he recovered himself, and continued with dignity: “You perhaps know those exquisite words of a German author, which would seem to refer to such chance enjoyments as that which your short stay at Gundalunda has procured for us.”

“He’d talk the head off a hatchet,” murmured Patrick.

“Ahem! ‘So many rich and lovely flowers which bear no fruit spring up on the pathway of life that it is a happiness poetry was invented ,—’”

But the quotation was never finished. Mr. Gustavus in his enthusiasm had quickened his steps, drawing young Desmond with him. Isabel on the other hand had fallen back with the vague intention of changing the conversation by asking a question of the miner who followed. As she lingered a low rumble sounded in the gallery. The two foremost turned, startled by the noise, and hardly realizing how far behind was their companion. “Come, Miss Gauntlett,” they cried. But at that moment there was a deeper roar and sharp concussion, then darkness. The earth shook. Isabel felt herself seized in a powerful grip from behind, and drawn almost with the quickness of thought toward a side passage, while an authoritative voice said “Stand back—don’t be frightened.”

A mass of loosened stone had fallen, extinguishing the lights and blocking up the tunnel. There was a pause of horrified silence broken by the voices of Mr. Gustavus, Blaize, Patrick Desmond, and the manager, blending dis-

mayed in a chorus of ejaculations, and reassuring her as to the safety of their owners.

“I am glad they are not hurt,” she said, unconsciously drawing a deep breath of relief, and hardly considering whom she was addressing.

The miner uttered a peculiar sound, something between a laugh and a sigh.

“Your first thoughts when danger is past are for others. Ladies are not usually so self-forgetful, except when the safety of those most dear to them is concerned—hardly then. How far less in the case of comparative strangers! Excuse me; of course I heard your conversation. The rock has fallen exactly where you were standing. You only would have been injured. It is fortunate indeed that I was able to pull you back.”

Isabel turned, startled by the voice, and unable in the darkness to reconcile it with her first impression of the rough-bearded man in miner’s dress who had given her her lantern. The accents she heard were surely those of an English gentleman of refinement and education. So surprised was she that it did not occur to her to express any gratitude for what he had done.

“Miss Gauntlet, Miss Gauntlet!” cried Patrick Desmond from the other side of the barrier, in tones of the deepest anxiety.

“Braddick!” called the manager.

“I am here,” answered Isabel, faintly.

“The young lady is not hurt,” said the miner. “I will take her back. You will find it difficult to pass that block. Had you not better turn up to the higher level, and let us meet you at the shaft?”

“Why the deuce didn’t they attend to my orders, and stop blasting?” said the manager, angrily.

“There has been a mistake,” calmly rejoined the man. “It would be better to go back, and not risk its being repeated.”

Mr. Blaize eagerly embraced this view of the matter. He entreated Isabel to forgive his involuntary desertion. He implored the manager to proceed to the higher level. Let them gain the surface as quickly as possible. There was no saying what accident might not happen. Patrick Desmond took tender leave of Isabel through the wall of

stone. Their steps died away, and she was left in the darkness with her new companion.

The latter struck a match, and relit the candles. She was then able to examine his face. Assuredly, she had been right in her conjecture. On a more prolonged scrutiny the physiognomy confirmed the voice. Whatever his clothes, or the marks of toil upon his person, this man was a gentleman.

A pair of dark gray eyes looked straightly into hers. They were large, full lidded—rather striking eyes. Notwithstanding a certain melancholy in their expression they darted a gleam of humor. The forehead was prominent, the brows full; the features firm and compact. The mouth and chin were concealed by a thick dark mustache and short beard, evidently of recent growth, which gave an unkempt appearance to the face.

“I ought to say—I don’t know how to thank you,” began Isabel, confusedly, and paused.

“Not at all. It is I who should beg your pardon for having spoken so freely. To tell the truth, I forgot for the moment that we were in Australia.” He glanced down at his soiled garments—the flannel-shirt—collarless, the rough leggings, and at his bare arms and hands, marred by the stains of labor.

“I might have forgotten that, too,” answered Isabel. “I have only been a few days in this country.”

“Ah! so?” he said, with a look of inquiry; then seemed to check himself. “You are from England,” he went on, after a moment’s hesitation. “That makes itself evident. I beg your pardon,” seeing that she flushed, “I meant nothing disrespectful. Colonial ladies as a rule like the suggestion that their dress or manner is English. That is curious, but true, as you will discover. With men the case is different. One can’t offend a new chum more than by telling him he looks like one. You are pleased with what you have seen of Australian life?”

“I have only seen its bright side as yet.”

“Naturally. I hope you will not see any other. At any rate, you have come to the most beautiful part of Leichart’s Land. There is some grand scenery on the Eura river. We ought to be going back, or your friends will reach the shaft before us. Will you follow me?”

He strode on. Isabel crept silently in his wake. She

felt dazed, and her bosom was fluttered by vague wonder and newly stirred sadness. An odd fancy seized her that the eyes and tones were in some manner familiar; how, she could not tell. The way was uneven and encumbered by heaps of loose stone. She tripped over one of these. He turned quickly at her half-stifled exclamation.

“It is rough walking. I did not remember that before you had some one on each side. I can’t offer you an arm, but I’ll hold the lamp so that you may pick your steps better.”

They had not far to go. A glimmer of several lamps before them revealed the whereabouts of the shaft. The manager and his companions were approaching by another tunnel. Isabel paused, vividly realizing that this man had saved her life; that she would in all probability never see him again, and that she had rendered him but the baldest acknowledgment of the service. A strange shyness overpowered her. Suddenly, her dream in the train flashed into her mind. She colored deeply, and was still more embarrassed by the consciousness that he was now facing her, and by the light of her own candle could observe her blush. “Mr. Braddick—I think that is your name,” she began, hesitatingly. “I have not said anything to you that I ought. I might have been killed but for you.”

He lowered his lamp, and looked at her earnestly. “We shall perhaps meet again, Miss Gauntlett, and I may then have an opportunity of earning your thanks. I have not done so yet. You are remaining in this district?”

“I am going to stay for some time with my uncle, Captain Clephane.”

“At Tieryboo? I passed by there a little while ago, overlanding cattle. For aught that I know, I may cross the border again soon. When one is digger, stockman, drover—anything in short that offers a means of livelihood—one is apt to find one’s self in many different places. And, now that your friends are here, I will leave you. Good-bye.”

There was a note of bitterness in his voice which roused her keenest sympathy. Obeying an impulse, she stretched forth her hand. He did not see, or would not take it. Raising his hat and bowing with distant politeness he turned in the direction whence they had come. Patrick Desmond advanced: “Oh, Miss Gauntlett, it’s thankful that I am,”

he began effusively. "You'll have seen enough of the mine, and Mr. Gustavus will give us no peace till we are out of hearing of gunpowder. Don't be off in such a hurry, Braddick," he shouted. "There's something I've got to talk to you about."

But Braddick had disappeared.

They entered the cage, and Mr. Gustavus Blaize succumbed once more under the grasp of his enemy. Isabel was preoccupied, and replied at random to the manager's apologies and invitations to come again. She was experiencing the curious sensation of contact between actual and visionary life. As in the darkness of the storm she had met the gaze of her dream companion, so Braddick's eyes had pierced the gloom of the mine; and both glances were charged with the same fire—the same melancholy.

They lingered for a little while to witness the quartz-crushing operations, then walked across the plain back to where Mrs. Blaize had remained with the buggy. Once again beneath the blue of heaven, Mr. Gustavus became sentimental and didactic, and proceeded to expatiate upon the relations of Nature with Art and Love, according to him prime factors in the working of the universe. Suddenly he observed:

"The face of that miner who brought you back to the shaft seemed familiar to me, Miss Gauntlett. I connect it with one of my many visits to England, but in what particular, at this moment, eludes my memory. I think you mentioned his name, Desmond."

"It's Braddick that he calls himself, and he is the man I was speaking of to Mr. Reay that had been drover to that thief of the world, old Fyson. He is a gentleman, Mr. Gustavus; and, if it's the private detective business that ye'll be after, there are plenty more sprigs of gentility down on their luck in these parts that'll give ye exercise for your brains. Sure if Wyeroo isn't just swarming with the aristocracy, counting meself—for isn't my own cousin Viscount Macrone—with three healthy boys between me and fortune? Ah, Miss Gauntlett, dear, if it's high society that you're pining for, just walk with me by the Boomerang Gully and I'll show you three 'honorable' up to their knees in dirty water, with no more than a blanket apiece and two tin 'billies' among them."

CHAPTER XV.

A GENTLEMAN FROM ENGLAND.

UPON the return of the excursionists from Wyeroo, Gundalunda did not show the deserted aspect it had worn when they had left the station that morning.

It was Saturday afternoon. The hands had come in for their rations and were gathered round the veranda of the store-room, where Mr. Blaize was weighing out the weekly allowance of flour, tea, and sugar—"eight, four, and a quarter"—which he mechanically ticked down in the day-book beside him. Several horses turned out near the yard, with the saddle-marks fresh upon their backs, gave evidence of late arrivals; while bridles, stock-whips, and sundry bundles of blankets, telling of the return of Ferguson's mustering-party, were piled upon the low bark roof of one of the "lean-to" huts—a convenient place for drying purposes, to judge from the miscellaneous articles there exhibited—lengths of green hide, damp saddle-cloths, and pieces of salt-junk, of the color and consistency of leather.

Combo, the aboriginal, danced out to meet the buggy and unstrap the leaders, shouting, "Budgery massa sit down along a humpey. That give black fellow nobbler;" and a group of the camp blacks, who had not been similarly favored, set up a howl, while they contemplated with melancholy admiration a brand-new valise of superior manufacture, a silver hunting-flask, and a light water-proof which hung over the garden-palings.

"By these tokens I should say that Captain Clephane has brought over a new chum from Nash's, or that Mr. Bertram Wyatt has arrived" said young Desmond.

Mrs. Blaize fluttered across the yard to her husband, full of anxious inquiries as to his welfare during her absence. "You haven't been working in the heat of the sun, have you, now, darling? And if there are any more rations to be weighed let me do it while you chat to Miss Gauntlett. She won't be much longer with us, if it's true that her uncle has come. And where is Duncan Reay?"

Mr. Blaize turned his eyes affectionately upon Isabel. She had often caught his gaze so fixed; and suspected, what was

indeed the truth, that she reminded him of his dead daughter. But he only sighed, saying nothing, then absently placed in his wife's hands the scoop with which he had been ladling out sugar.

"Mr. Reay has gone home across country; but he has sent a friendly message, Judith, and a letter from Gretta begging us to go over there at Christmas. I think that change of scene is pleasant sometimes, and so will accept the invitation if you are agreeable, and if Mr. Ferguson and his partner are willing."

"Dear heart!" said Mrs. Blaize. "It would be a poor Christmas that we should spend by ourselves at Gundalunda, for James Ferguson isn't likely to stop far from Doondi. Has Mr. Wyatt come?"

"Yes; Mr. Bertram Wyatt has arrived in the company of Captain Clephane, who is anxious to move on to-morrow. I'm sorry to think that we are losing you, Miss Gauntlett. Here they come: and I'll leave you, for I'm a little out of my element amongst strangers."

The old man shuffled off. Mrs. Blaize was dismissing the last of the hands with a nod and a handful of dried apples for his children. There was a sound of voices in the veranda of the "big house," and Clephane, Ferguson, and a stranger walked across, the two latter side by side, so that Isabel had an opportunity of comparing the owners of Gundalunda.

Mr. Bertram Wyatt in no way resembled his partner. He was of the type which is instinctively associated with European refinement and cosmopolitan experience. In his case the conclusion was hardly justified, for he was Australian by birth; and, though he had been to Oxford, had spent a winter in Italy, and knew as much as most people about English and continental society, a considerable part of his life had been passed in the colonies.

He was of slender build, brown in coloring, with full eyes set wide apart, a silky mustache, and decidedly handsome profile. His clothes were well made, and none of his movements were clumsy. Without seeming self-conscious, he gave the impression that he fancied himself superior to his surroundings. He had a very pleasant smile, and there was about him a suggestion of romantic experience.

Wyatt had met James Ferguson in Victoria, and, when

the latter had sold the station he then owned, the two men joined in a new investment. But Ferguson was considered the working member of the firm; and all Wyatt's knowledge of the Eura district had been gleaned during a hurried visit of inspection prior to the purchase of Gundalunda. Some excitement was then created by the rumor of his engagement to a daughter of the governor of one of the neighboring colonies, but almost before it could be verified Mr. Wyatt sailed for England, and it transpired that the engagement had been abruptly broken off. The governor in question had lately been transferred to Leichardt's Land.

Wyatt and Mrs. Blaize were old friends, and there was real cordiality in his greeting and in the compliments he paid her upon the improvements she had effected at Gundalunda. It might have been easily seen that sympathy was a necessity to the young man; and there was something taking in his dependence upon the good-will of those with whom he lived. He seemed disposed to be pleased with everything, congratulated himself upon having made acquaintance with Mr. Reay and Captain Clephane at Nash's station the night before, and enlarged upon the advantage of having such neighbors as those at Tieryboo and Doondi. He seemed to aim at saying the right thing, but evidently did not wish to appear thoroughly at home in the bush. It was not his sphere, but he was amiably determined to accommodate his aspirations to circumstances. This, every tone conveyed; but the affectation or rather conviction was so unconscious, so entirely apart from any want of good breeding, that it could hardly be quarreled with. There was something special in his greeting to Isabel: it seemed to take for granted that they must have interests in common, and might have befitted a naturalized foreigner welcoming a fellow-countryman to the land of his adoption. His eye dwelt with pleasure, that was quite impersonal, upon certain little adornments and peculiarities to be noticed in her dress, not of Australian origin. He began at once to talk about England. She was unresponsive. He appealed to Clephane, old Gustavus Blaize joined eagerly in the conversation, and the three might, for all the world, have been discussing social topics in a London drawing-room. Some spirit of contrariety in Isabel rebelled against the tendency to Anglomania. She was glad to avow ignorance, and to disclaim the imputation of superiority. She felt disposed

to range herself upon the side of James Ferguson, who listened with an interest she could not understand, putting in a remark every now and then, which had the savor, so readily detected, of acquaintance with the thing in question by means of books rather than personal experience.

But there was no doubt that Mr. Wyatt had charming manners, was eminently sympathetic; and could talk well. The evening passed pleasantly to all, except perhaps to Mr. Gustavus, who was silent and depressed. Mrs. Blaize, at Wyatt's request, produced from the store-room (cellars are unknown in the bush) some claret of a superior vintage. It may be mentioned incidentally that wine of good quality is not common in Australian stations, where the usual drink is tea or brandy and water. Captain Clephane forgot his Australian character, and was full of questions and comments upon affairs over the water. The ruby liquid was a talisman transporting him to well-remembered scenes from which he was only recalled by the remembrance of his Mollie and an allusion to Jinks. Over the water! To Ferguson that phrase represented the mystic world where dwelt Gretta's ideal, so far and yet so near; the great ocean that for the others was completely bridged by sympathies and associations with which he had no part.

Isabel listened and wondered. They were sitting in the veranda open to the night, with the vast lonely bush stretching out to the horizon; and all the strange perfumes and sounds of birds and insects floating in upon the still air. But for these surroundings it would have been difficult to realize that they were many thousands of miles from the scene of their talk. Clephane and Wyatt were discussing the relations of the motherland with her colonies, and condemning the policy which insists upon turning the latter into a haven for the erring and unfortunate. It was absurd to suppose that the riff-raff which must certainly go to the bottom in more crowded streams would float upon the Australian social current. Leichardt's Land, in especial, was quoted as an effective sink, and emigration a convenient means of enabling impoverished parents to rid themselves of disagreeable incubi in the shape of penniless or vicious younger sons. Involuntarily Isabel thought of the miner Braddick, and a tender feeling of pity stirred her heart as she reflected upon the possible causes which had drifted him to Australia. She felt her face grow hot with

a sudden flush when Patrick Desmond interrupted the discussion.

“ That man I was talking to you about, Captain Clephane—the drover—was at the Great Phoenix to-day; but he wouldn’t give me the chance of a word with him. I’ll be wanting a hand if I’m to drive over the cattle you’ve bought from Nash’s, and, if you are agreeable, I’ll give him the job, though it is but a short one.”

“ It may be longer if he is worth anything,” said Clephane, “ for there’s the mob to be taken north. You can bring him to Doondi, Pat, and we’ll see how he shapes. We sha’n’t have any hard work now till after Christmas.”

“ Ah, then, sure,” said Pat, in a melancholy tone, “ it’s under some old gum-tree in the Never Never country that I’ll be spending my next Christmas after this one. I’ll be munching damper and salt-junk.”

“ And carving it up, and calling one piece mince-pie and another turkey,” said Clephane, laughing. “ All the more reason we should have a merry Christmas at Doondi.”

“ You are coming over in a few days, aren’t you, Ferguson?” he went on. “ And Mrs. Blaize, we can’t do without you to help stir the pudding. As for Wyatt I have almost persuaded him to ride over with me to-morrow and make acquaintance with my wife and her sisters.”

Mr. Wyatt did not require much pressing to accept the invitation. Soon an attractive programme was made out. Clephane, Miss Gauntlett, and Bertram would go to Doondi on the morrow. Ferguson and Mr. and Mrs. Blaize agreed to follow a week later, while Patrick Desmond, taking Wyeroo on his way, and securing the services of Braddick as drover, would betake himself to Nash’s station, and put in an appearance at the Reays when the cattle were ready for delivery. Work should be suspended during the Christmas week, and it was proposed that a favorite project of Greta’s—a camping-out expedition to the Comongin Range—should be put into execution.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN AUSTRALIAN DAIRY-MAID.

THE dairy at Doondi was a queer, dilapidated building, standing by itself, a few yards from the court-yard fence—a

square slab hut, with wide apertures between the slabs, and a bark roof sloping downward till it almost met the passion-fruit-covered palisading that inclosed the earthen veranda. Within, it was canvas-lined, cool, dark, and fragrant, with a space between the wall and the roof which allowed the air to play freely upon the tin pans of creamy milk, each covered with spotless muslin, and upon the earthenware vessels containing pats of butter, which ought to have been hard and golden, but which, to Gretta's despair, were white and flabby, and could not, with the thermometer at 80°, be persuaded to shape themselves into anything like an agreeable consistency. A gum-tree reared its lanky branches above the roof, and every now and then a gust of wind would shake down a little shower of leaves and blossoms upon the water-cart, a large barrel placed horizontally upon a frame of wood, that stood close to the dairy. Every morning Maafu the Kanaka would bring round the blear-eyed stallion, told off for the sober duties of fetching wood and carrying water, would harness him to the shafts, and trundle down to the creek, backward and forward many times, and, after replenishing the butts of corrugated iron that stood at one end of the house, would restore the cart to its former position, so placed that Gretta could draw for herself the water she required for her operations in the dairy.

This was Gretta's province. In early morning and late afternoon she stood over her milk-pans, skimming the cream, molding her pats of butter, or measuring out their allowance to the hut-keepers; while the pet calves and foals, of which there were always several to be reared by hand at Doondi, the Cochin-China fowls, a tame kangaroo, and a young native bear, drank their fill of the thick milk which Maafu, her factotum, had poured into the wooden troughs outside the veranda.

The heat of the day was over, and Gretta sat upon a little bench under the trailing green withes that hung from the roof of the dairy, singing as she churned.

The churn stood in a tub of clear cool water. Round and round moved the handle. Sometimes it slipped in its socket, and then the drops would splash up on to Gretta's face and upon the holland apron which covered her blue print-dress. Occasionally she paused to rest for a moment; then would go on again; her thoughts flowing to the rhythmic motion of the wheel, and her snatches of song

ceasing, while, with a look of faint expectancy upon her face, her eyes were turned dreamily in the direction of the stock-yard for, whereas Tieryboo and the Selection lay southward across the river, visitors from Gundalunda must certainly appear at the upper slip-rails.

She was a healthy-minded girl, and the little ebullitions of enthusiasm, the longings for exciting experience for some phase of life which should not be purely pastoral, were no outgrowth of morbid discontent. But Gretta knew that she was pretty, and that she had aspirations beyond the commonplace routine of bush life. She felt with a vague, half-amused resentment, that she had somehow been defrauded of her just rights. At her age most girls had loved—or, at least, been wooed by men worthy of love. But no hero had, as yet, crossed her path; not one, at any rate, whose magic touch should throw open to her that secret chamber of romance which all women so ardently desire to enter. It seemed sometimes to Gretta that she was doomed to live and die on the banks of the Eura without having gained one glimpse of the real world that makes history. Only shadows, she thought, could ever reach this quiet retreat—shadows of action and of feeling, dim presentations of all those thrilling emotions which she fancied might rule other lives. Was it then in England alone that heart-dramas were enacted? Blind Gretta! who saw nothing of the tragedy passing before her very eyes, and to whom the love-story of Hester Murgatroyd and Durnford was a sealed book.

She was too much occupied with her own dreams to have become aware of the smothered passions burning slowly but fiercely in the breasts of these two quiet people, who were to her merely a part of her own prosaic surroundings. There they both were now in sight, Hester moving sedately about the garden, seemingly intent upon the nosegay she was gathering to place in Miss Gauntlett's room; and Durnford yonder, in the veranda of the bachelors' quarters, steadily poring over his book. Gretta did not observe the furtive looks which he threw every now and then toward the garden; but, while she wondered vaguely whether James Ferguson would or would not ride over with her brother-in-law that day, and whether, if he did, life would be rendered any the more eventful for his presence, she cast a thought—partly envious, partly compassionate—at

the temperaments which were apparently contented with monotony, and required no stimulus of agreeable anticipation to give point to existence.

These theories and speculations were not due to the fact that Gretta was disappointed with her lot, or that she craved excitement and conquest. Of admiration, could she content herself with the kind offered, she might have had her fill. There was hardly a young squatter or stock-rider in the district who was not ready to place himself and his possessions at Miss Reay's feet. But she was fastidious, and, moreover, she had been quite sincere in her declaration that she would marry no one who was Australian pure and simple. Her appreciation of all that emanated from the mother-land was genuine, if exaggerated. It must be remembered that Antipodean youth frames its standard of ideal perfection upon books, which deal only with the associations of the Old World, and have no connecting links with the New. A young community must develop in accordance with the peculiar conditions of its being, and it is well known that an original departure from received canons is usually the outcome of exhausted civilization.

Gretta was in the position of a provincial genius who curses fate that he was not born in London, and can find no fount of inspiration apart from the fret and fever of crowded humanity. Had James Ferguson been educated in England, thus acquiring a certain social polish, and particular modes of thought, and forms of expression which should harmonize with the ideal she had created for herself, Gretta's heart would most likely have responded to his devotion. She knew that he was good, true, and manly. She leaned upon him with a trust of the depth of which she was hardly conscious; and even at times contemplated marriage with him as a distant possibility, when she should have amply proved to herself the fallacy of romantic visions. In the meantime she sighed for a sensation, for a love which should thrill her innocent being. He inspired her with a homely sort of affection. His society brought her a pleasant sense of protection and comfort. She acknowledged him the superior of all men who had as yet approached her as suitors. But he was not her knight—not her ideal. He was simply James Ferguson, born and bred in Australia—a squatter, like her own father and brother, practical as they were, and as keenly alive to the vital ques-

tions of Free Selection, wire-fencing, the marsupial plague, and inoculation. She always saw him in her imagination clad in bushman's garb with hands a little roughened by toil in the yards, with none of those accessories of refined life which she wished to associate with her hero, against a background of eucalyptus-trees, lowing cattle, and dull station details. He merely figured as the commonplace personage of fiction—plodding, estimable, and provincial, who is brought forward as a foil to the fascinating, unreliable man of the world. To the latter, the heroine's woes are chiefly due; but he is the very embodiment of that first principle in a true girl's creed, "Love before all."

In the third volume, the prosaic hero's good qualities rule triumphantly. He steers the heroine into calm. He is the *Deus ex machina* who magnanimously brings about the finale, either by marrying her to the rehabilitated man of her choice, or by consoling her with his own manly virtues; but at best he is only the secondary personage on the stage. Gretta sighed and smiled to think that there were not even the materials for his stock-drama at hand. It was the play with Hamlet wanting.

The churn-handle moved more slowly, and greasy particles exuded from cracks in the lid, telling that the butter was coming. A critical juncture this, when the precise moment of dashing in the coolest water procurable would determine the quality and consistency of the churning. Gretta cooed for the boys and the children, and presently her bare arms were plunged into the vessel, the flabby mass was brought forth, and the butter-milk poured out in goodly draughts, to the satisfaction of Joe, Mark, and Jinks, to say nothing of the stray pickaninnies who had stolen up unawares.

Mr. Durnford, passing by, nodded and smiled. He was going to join Hester in the garden. The cord of passionate sympathy which bound their hearts together was drawing him too strongly to be resisted. He had not spoken to her alone since their parting on the evening of that memorable thunder-storm. She had caught a feverish cold, and had only to-day left her room. He knew that there would be but small opportunity for private conversation at present. The Gundalunda party was expected at any moment, was even now in sight; but at least he might look upon her,

and might be the richer and the happier for one of her rare, sweet smiles.

“ Will you have a drink of butter-milk, Mr. Durnford?” said Gretta, handing him a pannikin.

He accepted it with a courteous bow:

“ Thank you, Miss Reay. I did not come down for this, though. There are whips cracking across the gully, and I’m going to tell Mrs. Clephane that her husband will be here in a minute or two.”

“ Oh, they are coming, are they?” said Gretta carelessly, though her color rose as she spoke. “ Well, I have done my churning just in time to give them some fresh butter with their scones for tea.”

She did not let down her sleeve, or rearrange her apron, and determined that she would not hurry on her operation a jot for the sake of looking like an unoccupied fine lady when Miss Gauntlett should first behold her. She went on deliberately with her work, patting and squeezing the butter, draining off the milky water, and pouring fresh into the pan.

“ Now for the mold, Joe; a pat for tea, and one for breakfast, and we’ll leave the rest to harden till to-morrow.”

“ Here they are,” cried Joe, as two loud reports from a stock-whip rent the air. “ It wouldn’t be Clephane if he didn’t make you believe that he was behind a mob of scrubbers. If Miss Gauntlett is as jolly as she looks, England forever! You’ll have to get a new habit, Gretta, and I must lend you my Leichardt’s Town billycock, or ‘ Old Gold’ will forsake you to a certainty. As for you, young one,” added Joe, nodding confidentially at Jinks, “ don’t you count on your young man. You’ll never be Mrs. Patrick Desmond. Long engagements are a mistake, Jinks. What chance has a little witch like you beside that vision of beauty? Poor Jinks! And, oh, Moses! Here’s a stunner! Has Clephane nabbed another new chum? No; I never saw a new chum that wasn’t clad for a voyage to the North Pole. That fellow can sit a horse too—and, by George, he’s on Gundalunda Roadster. The London and Oxford mixture, Wyatt, I bet. Oh, I say, Gretta, pull down your sleeves. Don’t shock his tender sensibilities. He’ll take you for a dairy-maid. And after having loved a governor’s daughter!”

The clatter of horses' hoofs cut short Joe's apostrophes. The dogs began to bark. Jinks set up a cry of,

"Dad, I've been a good girl. Has your niece brought some snow to cool us?" and three riders drew up exactly opposite the dairy where Gretta was conducting her operations.

Mr. Bertram Wyatt had an eye for the beautiful, and he had certainly never been a prettier living picture than that of this young girl, standing out against a dark background of slabs, and framed by trailing passion-creepers. Her baby face, with its peach-like cheeks, great soft eyes, and all its tender dimples, was turned slightly upward. Her attitude, as she manipulated the lump of butter and tossed it on to the dish—which, for mischief's sake, Joe held on a level with her shoulder—showed to advantage the curves of her waist and bust.

"Capital, Gretta!" sympathetically murmured Jack Clephane, as he got down and submitted to the embraces of Jinks.

But Gretta's butter-making was finished. Mr. Reay, at the barking of the dogs, had come forth from the little back veranda room which he called his office, and where, with door and window wide open, he transacted his station business, to the edification of all loiterers in the back-yard. Now, while he assisted Isabel Gauntlett from her horse and introduced his two elder daughters to her, Gretta put away her butter-pat, pulled down her sleeves, unbuttoned her apron, and came shyly forth to greet the new guests.

"And this is Gretta," said her father, proudly drawing her toward him; "this is the wee woman, though she isn't so very wee," he added, lifting his gaze to her respectable height of five feet seven inches. "Mr. Wyatt, I must introduce you to my youngest daughter, Gretta. And now, come into the parlor. They'll see after the swags. You'll be wearying for some tea."

CHAPTER XVII.

FRILLED PETTICOATS.

MOLLIE CLEPHANE felt a little shy of her new niece. It was a slight relief to her mind when she perceived that Isabel was certainly shy also, and appeared to wince somewhat

under the steady gaze of Jinks's black eyes. Jinks was given to analysis. She always wanted to know the whys and wherefores, and never took a situation for granted, but reasoned upon it from the past to the future. At the present moment she was trying to determine, from an impartial point of view, which was the prettiest—her aunt Gretta or the new arrival. The decision involved other and more complicated considerations. For Jinks was a child of strong affections and of a jealous disposition. It was an understood thing that she loved Patrick Desmond, and that she intended to marry him when she was grown up, and to live with him in England. Jinks was quite of Gretta's opinion in regard to her native land, though her skeptical mind accepted, with cautious reservations, the various statements that were put forth concerning England, and which she was not in a position to verify. Jinks's engagement was a source of amusement to her young uncles at Doondi. She bore their chaff with philosophical composure, for she had already observed, in relation to her aunt Gretta, that love-making was considered, on the Eura at all events, a legitimate subject of ridicule. At one time Jinks had suffered serious qualms of jealousy, and had heroically resolved to yield up Patrick to her aunt. But Pat's devotion to Gretta was now cooled down, and he had assured Jinks, in the presence of the whole family, that she was henceforth to reign as queen of his heart. Joe's withering remarks, however, caused Jinks's faith to waver. Pat had once loved Gretta. Pat was notoriously fickle. Clearly, if Miss Gauntlett possessed greater beauty than Gretta, that surplus quantity might be the ruin of Jinks's happiness, for never, never could Jinks love again.

"Don't stare so, Jinks," said Mrs. Clephane, sternly.

"I'm sure she isn't as pretty as Aunt Gretta. Her eyes are not as big, and she has no color in her cheeks," triumphantly exclaimed Jinks, and was immediately told that little girls should hold their tongues in presence of their elders and betters.

Jinks lowered her eyes. "I am going into the garden," said she, with dignity. "I shall talk to Maafu—he is not my better. You needn't be afraid, Aunt Hester; I shall keep my promise, and be a lady."

In alarm, Mrs. Clephane demanded what she had to say to Maafu.

"I am going to ask him how he made his hair yellow," said Jinks, and departed looking the picture of innocence, but with a deep scheme already laid in her heart.

The princesses in the story-books had always golden locks, and her father drew a sharp distinction between bad black-haired children like herself and the blue-eyed fair-haired little girls who never fell into tantrums or wanted whopping. Isabel Gauntlett's hair was like unspun silk, Maafu's resembled tow, but there was sufficient similarity in the color of the two to set Jinks's imagination working; and, as she was aware that Maafu had turned his wiry locks from black to yellow, it occurred to her that she might accomplish a like transformation, and establish an incontestable claim to Pat Desmond's favor.

Mrs. Clephane had taken her guest into the little veranda room allotted to her, upon which much housewifely care had been expended. Hester Murgatroyd accompanied them with the bouquet she had gathered, and placed it in a vase upon the dressing-table. Isabel thanked her, and made some timid advances toward friendship, but Hester was too indifferent or self-absorbed to return them with any cordiality. Presently she left the aunt and niece together.

"I hope you and Uncle Jack won't find me a great trouble," said Isabel, in a deprecatory tone; "my sister—we all thought it very kind of you to be willing to receive me."

"I hope you won't think us very rough," piteously returned Mollie, feeling awkward and stiff; "you have been accustomed to a different sort of life, and to comforts, perhaps, that we haven't got. We can only give you a welcome, and—and, every one says the scenery about us is very fine. Of course it's very nice to be near Doondi," she went on with nervous hurry; "but I almost wish that Jack hadn't thought quite so much about the scenery when he bought Tieryboo—and Gundalunda for sale, too, at that time!"

"Why?" asked Isabel, vaguely.

"Oh, we are not fit for anything but store-cattle, we are all blady grass and brigalow scrub, you know, and fine scenery doesn't make up for that. And then we are on the other side of the border, and our drays have to come up through New South Wales, which takes a long time. There's no driving-road across the mountains from here,

and I'm afraid you'll have to leave your big boxes here. And just now we are short of stores," she added, confusedly; "and there's no Liebig's Essence, or cocoa, or bottled porter, or anything tasty on the station—and you're so delicate, aren't you?"

"Oh, please!" cried Isabel, dismayed, "you needn't make an invalid of me, and I don't want bottled porter. I am quite strong now. It was only that I had congestion of the lungs this autumn, and the doctors said I ought to spend a year in a warm climate."

"Well," said Mollie, in a tone of satisfaction, "it is hot enough here. It's too hot for most people. But I think I'd rather have it than your cold; and we have no mosquitoes on the Eura—that's one's good thing."

Isabel remembered the railway journey and Jerry's tail, and assented that it was a good thing; but added that she did not mind mosquitoes.

"All new chums say that," replied Mollie, darkly; "but just wait till they have to camp out without nets!"

There was a pause. Isabel had taken off her gloves, and Mollie's eyes wandered from the English girl's slim white hands, which looked as though they had been modeled for show under a glass-case, down to her own, sun-browned and roughened by work. She felt also the great contrast between her home-made gown, and her general air of rusticity, and Isabel's perfectly cut riding-habit, and graces of manner and bearing.

Mollie had always cherished a secret resentment against Jack's "grand English relations," two or three of whom had written to her on her marriage in terms of distant cordiality, and had taken no notice of her since, till a temporary home was required for Isabel.

"She is like a figure out of a fashion-book," thought Mollie; "she is full of English ways. How she will despise us all! I dare say that she is wondering now what could have induced Jack to marry such a common stupid sort of person as I am."

Isabel's wistful gaze failed to correct the impression.

"You'd like to change your habit," said Mollie. "We have a tea-dinner at seven—that is, most of us drink tea—it's the regular thing in the bush, you know. But there's wine, or anything else you like."

"I like tea," seriously answered Isabel.

"I'll help you to put your things away," said Mollie. "And, oh, they haven't brought your pack in; I'll see after it."

She went out, but presently returned followed by a black boy with the two canvas-bags that contained a part of Isabel's wardrobe—the rest had been left in her trunks at Gundalunda, to be brought over on the first convenient opportunity. The black boy grinned, and made the clicking noise against his teeth which with the natives is expressive of admiration. "Tsch! Tsch!" he said. "Budgery grass belonging to that fellow White Mary."

"He means your hair," explained Mollie, touching a thick flaxen rope which had fallen loose upon the young girl's shoulder.

They both laughed, and this broke the ice a little. Mollie began to take the things out of the saddle-bags, and to arrange them in the cedar cupboard, which was evidently of home manufacture.

"Oh!" protested Isabel, "I am not quite useless. You mustn't begin by waiting on me, Aunt—Aunt Clephane."

Mollie paused with an elaborately frilled petticoat in her arms, which she was contemplating with puckered brow, and asked abruptly:

"Haven't you got any plain ones? I mean," she added nervously, for Isabel looked surprised, "it would be such a pity to spoil this beautiful linen in the washing; and we're obliged to have it done by a half-caste woman at Tieryboo. It was such a piece of work teaching her how to get up Jack's shirts."

"I've plenty of plain ones, Aunt Clephane," replied Isabel, submissively. "I'll put these away." There was a tremble in her voice. She was tired and strange, and Mollie's evident distrust of her power of adaptability jarred upon her sensitive nature.

"Won't you call me Mollie?" said Mrs. Clephane, impulsively. "Aunt doesn't seem natural. You're not so very much younger than I am."

"I am twenty-one," said Isabel. "I will gladly call you Mollie."

"And I am thirty. Hester is thirty-two, and Gretta is twenty. And then there's Sib and the boys. You'll get to know all about us soon, and all about Australia too."

"I'm very ignorant," said Isabel. "I don't know any-

thing about Australia except what I've read in 'Geoffrey Hamlyn.' ”

“ There,” exclaimed Mollie, with a quicker perception of her point of vantage than might have been expected in one so stolid, “ I have the pull over you, for we are always reading English novels. Though, to be sure, if they are as unlike you as 'Geoffrey Hamlyn' is unlike us on the Eura—” She paused in perplexed recollection of certain florid descriptions of European society which Jack had pronounced “ rot,” but which she fancied might be in harmony with Isabel Gauntlett's experience of life. “ I suppose they are like you. At all events you put me in mind of a person in a book.”

“ I don't feel like one,” answered Isabel, with a little laugh; “ or rather, I never did in England. I think this is like a book. Nothing exciting ever happened to me till I came out here—till the other day,” and she stopped and blushed.

“ What was that?” asked Mollie with interest. “ Did it happen while you were at Gundalunda? It wasn't a proposal from Gustavus Blaize? That's nothing: he proposed to Gretta last week.”

Isabel laughed again.

“ It wasn't that. It was only going to Wyeroo, and being taken down the mine. There was some blasting, and a piece of rock fell quite close to me. I might have been killed.” She halted, shrinking from mention of her deliverer; and, dreading further questioning, she counterqueried, “ Why isn't 'Geoffrey Hamlyn' like you?”

“ Oh, we are not all convicts,” began Mollie—it was now her turn to blush hotly—“ and we are not all great people in disguise,” she went on hurriedly. “ And station-life isn't a picnic, nor need you be afraid of bushrangers in these parts, though indeed our mailman was in a regular funk the other day, for there's a report that a new Ned Kelly, who calls himself Captain Rainbow, has started over the border, and stuck up the Preston mail. But I won't frighten you, and I am keeping you from dressing. You'll hear a bell ring soon; and, if you are not in the veranda, I'll come for you here.”

Isabel put out her hands. Her pretty beseeching face was turned up toward Mollie, and Mrs. Clephane's shyness was so far overcome that she bent forward and kissed it

warmly. "I think we'll just try to be like sisters. I know we shall get on. You didn't mind what I said about the petticoats?"

Thus a good understanding was established between the two, and rapidly cemented to a close friendship, when a further dive into Isabel's saddle-bags produced a little Bond Street frock for Jinks, and sundry knickknacks for Mollie herself, which Lady Hetherington had chosen. The gifts and Isabel's gentle appeal brought about a complete change in Mollie's attitude, and the simple-minded, homely Australian woman was herself again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IMPORTED FROM ENGLAND.

To turn from Doondi veranda toward the somber expanse of bush and the majestic line of mountains blocking up the horizon, was like gazing out upon a waste of waters from the deck of a lighted and crowded ship.

Doondi was never silent; at evening it was even less so than during the day, for the men were all in from the run, and the balmy night-air seemed a fit atmosphere in which to be conversational and frolicsome.

Every door, front and rear, was thrown wide open. At that time of year it was happiness to live in a thorough draught. The lamp-light streamed out in broad lines upon the veranda-boards and away into the dim garden, widening as it traveled, its rays meeting and crossing in the little court-yard, round three sides of which the wooden buildings extended. Of the wings facing each other, one was given up to members of the family, including the Clephanes and their relative, the other contained the kitchen, store, and bachelor guest-chambers, while in the main cottage were the sitting-rooms, two or three bedrooms, and Mr. Reay's office, which last, having windows looking on to the court-yard, was inconveniently placed for the transaction of private business.

The store-door stood open and Sib was giving out rations to a late passer-by.

In the kitchen the dresser shone, the tin covers caught reflections from the great open fire-place, and the women

servants bustled to and fro, every now and then throwing a word to the men who were smoking and yarning at their ease on the back veranda. Maafu and Combo were chattering by the water-cask; a pair of young lubras exhibiting a fresh-water cod, put forth a claim for "toombacco;" and down from the stock-yard floated the not unmelodious lowing of a mob of beasts which had been brought in that afternoon. Captain Clephane, in evening attire of spotless white duck, was expending his superfluous energy in the cracking of a new stock-whip; and every time the thong fell and the sharp *st'wt* rang through the air Barty gave an admiring shout and Jinks executed a leap from the veranda-rail, to which in the interval she again laboriously climbed.

From window to window, right through the pretty cedar-lined parlor all lay visible; and Gretta's laughter in the front veranda mingled with voices in Mrs. Reay's study, one of which set Hester Murgatroyd's heart beating as she stood arranging some flowers in the parlor.

A brief colloquy was going on between Mr. Reay and the tutor.

"Well, Durnford, how are you? For once in a way are you coming down to-night? You've been keeping a good deal to yourself lately. Better let Mrs. Baynes know up at the quarters that there'll be no dinner wanted this evening, and join us down here. Afterward we'll just talk over that little business you mentioned."

"Thank you, Mr. Reay. Yes, I will come, with pleasure. But I'll say at once that it was premature of me to speak about the affair of the 'Review.' On consideration, I have made up my mind to decline the offer."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. The thing is not so grand that you should split scruples, and I have my doubts about a matter that old Blaize is concerned with. But you'll trust your own judgment, and consult your interests, Mr. Durnford, without reference to my opinion."

"I think that I can best serve my interests by remaining at Doondi, since you are good enough to wish it. I hope you won't think I'm unsettled. I was hasty in mentioning the proposition before I had weighed its disadvantages. I won't keep you, sir; it's past dinner-time, and I'll send Maafu up to Mrs. Baynes."

"What has come to the man?" said Mr. Reay a minute

later, as he passed into the sitting-room where Hester was adjusting a spray of lavender statice against a background of maidenhair fern on the chimney-piece. "You never saw such a long face as he pulled the day I started for Gundalunda. He seems quite perky again now. Then, he was all for being off, and to-day he is all for stopping. Well, I've been given to understand that poets are usually a shingle short. I hope it doesn't mean any nonsense about Gretta. Do you think it is anything of that sort, Hester?"

Hester's cheeks flushed. She was, by instinct, a truthful woman; and when she looked back upon her past career, was inclined to judge herself severely for the one course of disingenuousness that had resulted in her unfortunate marriage. It had been, in fact, the outcome of a romantic disposition, and even at the time, her pride had rebelled against it. Since then, her ways had been open, and she realized now with a shock that she had henceforth something in her daily life to conceal; something, which, if known, would be a shame to her and regarded with horror by the unsophisticated household of which she formed a part. It was natural that Gretta should have lovers, but that she, a married woman of thirty-two— Poor Hester's imagination refused to fill up the blank. She dared not meet her father's eyes. And yet a thrill of excitement ran through her at the mere suggestion of what the position involved, in spite of the shame of it—the secret joys, the stolen eye-caresses, the world of understanding which should be theirs and theirs alone. And why should it be shameful? Why should it be wrong? Why should all the sweetness of life be given over to the young, the free? Why should there be none for those who had suffered, and whose mistakes had forged fetters which must be worn in uncomplaining dignity, but which need not debar them from the right to solace? Hester, lost in bewildering speculations, turned with a start as her father repeated his question in sharper tones—

"Is Durnford in love with Gretta, Hester?"

"Gretta!" faltered Hester. "No, father, I—I am sure that he is not."

Mr. Reay gave a grunt of satisfaction, ignoring all other possibilities of the kind.

"Then there's one fool less than I fancied for a moment," he said. "We have too many love-sick bipeds al-

ready about Doondi. I couldn't stand another—established on the premises, too! Mollie, Jinks, Clephane! Come along! Here's dinner," he called, as a bell sounded through the house, creating a little stir in the veranda. "Miss Gauntlet," he added, making a stride through the French window and presenting his arm to Isabel, "you'll allow me the honor?"

Gretta and Mr. Wyatt were standing outside on the gravel-walk, a little apart from the others. She had a pair of scissors in her hand, and was cutting some of the early ripened bunches of grapes from the vine which tapestried the veranda. He held the leaf-trimmed basket, his handsome face turned toward her, his easy well-built figure picturesquely outlined against an abutting orange-tree. They had been interchanging preliminary commonplaces paving the way to future intimacy. Gretta had a bright pretty fashion of saying nothings, so that they seemed to open up indefinite vistas.

There had been a pause. Gretta was reaching up toward a particularly fine cluster pendent from the eaves, and which an impatient tug at the vine had set swaying. It was barely within reach of her scissors.

"Allow me," said Wyatt, politely.

She had, however, triumphantly snipped the stem.

"There!" she cried, "I have it." But as she spoke the bunch dropped upon the log-steps, and was bruised to pieces. Gretta laughed, though in a discomfited manner.

"They were too high for you," said Wyatt, seriously. "You should set your heart only upon things which are easily attainable."

"Is that your philosophy?" said Gretta.

"It's a very good system," he replied.

"The fruit of intuition or experience?" asked Gretta, demurely.

He hesitated an instant. There was a mischievous flash in his eye. Then with a serio-comic air:

"Your thrusts strike home," he said. "If I say experience, at any rate you'll respect my system."

"Not I," she exclaimed. "I'm like Jinks, I never take anything for granted. It would upset all my own theories. I have no idea of being contented with what falls at my feet."

"You have ambitions?"

"A million. I couldn't endure an horizon bounded by gum-trees. All the best things are out of reach. I want the best."

"You won't get them. They'll drop out of your grasp like that bunch of grapes."

"Then I'll make a virtue of necessity and be satisfied with the second best," said Gretta, taking the basket from him; "that's practical philosophy."

"Do you believe in philosophy?"

"No; it's like an umbrella which won't open when a shower of rain comes on. Do you like grapes?" she counter-queried.

"When they are easily gathered."

"That is a dreadfully lazy and immoral sentiment—especially for a squatter on the Eura, where each person is more energetic than his neighbor. I will give you a task. By way of wholesome training in the way you should go, I shall insist upon your coming out after dinner and gathering not only your own dessert but mine, too."

"I agree; you shall train me. I understand that I am on probation. Set me some more difficult task."

"One at a time. You won't find grape-picking so easy. Hardly any of the bunches are really ripe, and I'm extremely particular. I like the best, remember."

She passed with her basket into the drawing-room, where the rest of the party were already seated. It was an anomalous sort of meal. There was tea at one end of the table, over which Hester presided, and a piece of corned beef at the other. Mollie Clephane was carving a pair of chickens. Her husband mildly applauded. "At home, Mollie always feeds the lambs," he said. "I revel in cooking a damper, broiling a steak on two sticks, or even dispensing salt-junk with a clasp-knife, but to carve chickens at a family repast suggests the country pater-familias surrounded by his olive-branches, and calls up horrible visions of English middle-class domesticity."

Mr. Wyatt laughed, and Clephane went on:

"There's a want of dramatic fitness about your way of living, Mr. Reay. That's the one thing I have to find fault with in you Australians. You will not be original. You insist upon a Brummagem imitation of British observances. I always had a strong fellow-feeling with Mr.

Micawber when he renounced wine-glasses and drank his punch out of a pint-pot."

"Uncle Jack," said Isabel, "in the name of English civilization I protest against pint-pots."

"Don't you believe in him," sardonically remarked Mr. Reay, "he's a fraud. A fine fellow to talk is Clephane. I don't say that he can't work when he is after scrubbers or wild pigs, or some other scare-brain chase, but now hear! He first spends a fortune in carting Bass's ale the length of Tieryboo, and in the face of that he maintains that he has renounced English luxuries. That is na reasonable, at least, I don't think so. A man that won't drink tea or honest rum-and-water has no right to call himself a bushman."

There was a general laugh at the expense of Clephane, who calmly went to the sideboard and, in the absence of a corkscrew, knocked the head off a bottle of beer with his knife, then proceeded to pour out and hand round the contents, filling a pannikin for himself, which he flourished with a theatrical air that might have done credit even to Mr. Micawber.

"The pint-pot is an international compromise," said Durnford, making an effort at gayety.

"Not at all," replied Clephane in a melancholy tone; "it is a tribute to the memory of old England's pewter-measures and the pretty bar-maids who handed them. Why don't they start draught-beer and bar-maids on the Wyeroo line instead of Beamish & Co., with their cans of unmentionable anti-mosquito smoke. To be sure, Beamish and his can are thoroughly colonial."

"They should harmonize with your theory of dramatic fitness," put in Durnford.

"True," said Clephane, "they impressed my niece. She is very much struck with the realism of Australia."

"At all events," said Mr. Wyatt, looking toward Durnford, "Australian realism has here a fine corrective," and his glance seemed to comprehend Hester, and the two blooming girls opposite him.

"Which means?" asked Gretta, with a smile half shy, half provocative.

"A temple to the Ideal," replied he, promptly.

"Very pretty," murmured Gretta; and she could not

refrain from a glance at Durnford and Hester which brought the red glow into the latter's cheeks.

Durnford exclaimed,

"Oh, I am no idealist—that sort of thing is out of date."

And Gretta went on,

"Mr. Wyatt's speech was worthy of Mr. Gustavus Blaize;" then she inquired whether Miss Gauntlett had made that gentleman's acquaintance.

Some light banter followed, and a volley of questions from the boys as to Isabel's impressions of Leichardt's Land generally.

"You must make a public announcement," said Gretta, "like a certain royal personage who has been touring in the Antipodes, and who made a point of saying, the moment any one was presented to him, 'I am much surprised at the size of Australia; I think Sydney harbor the finest in the world; and I have not eaten a damper; and now we will have some conversation.'"

"Talking of personages," said Mr. Reay, passing his cup down for some more tea, "I am curious to see what sort of a chap they are sending us for a governor. A nonentity, I make no doubt. A crown colony is a bad school. Didn't some one say you were acquainted with him, Wyatt?"

"I was his private secretary for six months," replied Bertram, collectedly.

An uneasy consciousness disturbed Mr. Reay.

"Bless me! I remember hearing. But gossip goes in at one ear with me and out at the other. A pack of havers! You were private secretary? An upper-footman kind of business, isn't it? Six months? I suppose you couldn't stand the place?"

"It didn't stand me," said Bertram, grimly. "The whole thing was a fluke," he hastened to explain, but his manner seemed a little forced. "I came out from England in the same steamer with His Excellency, who was kind enough to take a fancy to me. His secretary got fever or something else on the voyage, and had to be sent home, and I was offered the billet, *pro tem.* You'll find General Baldock very amenable to his ministers, Mr. Reay; and if you are fond of balls, Miss Reay, I can prophesy that there will be a good many at Government House, for Miss Baldock, who is at the head of affairs, is very fond of gayety."

The boys were burning to ask some questions about Miss Baldock, and Joe tactlessly began, "I say—" when Gretta interposed.

"We don't know much about Government House or fashionable gayeties—at least Sib and I don't. We are the victims of an ungrateful country, which refuses to have our father for its Prime Minister; and, as it would be beneath our dignity to stoop lower, we don't remove to Leichardt's Town during the session, and father only rushes down when a railway bill comes on. We are the ill-used ones of the family, Mr. Wyatt. Mollie had her turn, and is tolerably civilized, but I have had no social advantages except three months in Sydney and the honor of dancing with a wandering earl, and of interchanging a few compliments with the celebrated personage before mentioned. As for Sib, he came out at the Wyeroo race ball, and went in again. His ideas of society are so elevated that no sphere, except an English one, will content him."

Isabel Gauntlett turned toward Sebastian, who was sitting next her. Many times during the meal his eyes had furtively sought her face with an expression of reverential admiration, but as yet his conversational efforts had been confined to such questions as: Would she take some more tea? Did she like scones or bread best? Was she tired after her long ride? etc. Sib rarely ventured upon more than a sentence at a time.

"Have you never been in England?" asked Isabel.

As she looked at him, Sib thought that he had never seen any one so beautiful, and at once so gracious and so dignified. He did not, as is usual with many uncultivated youths, deprecate the charms of his own sisters, and was keenly sensible of Gretta's prettiness and vivacity, of Mollie's matronly comeliness, and of Hester's spirituality. He shuddered at the thought of their association with anything unrefined, and drew a broad line between them and the daughters of squatters and Free Selectors on the Eura.

But even from his sisters Isabel stood apart in Sib's estimation as a Madonna from an ordinary woman. She had, he thought, a thousand little high-bred graces which they did not possess. Her smile, the lily-like droop of her head, the manner in which her hair was dressed, the sweep of her shoulders, the small daintinesses in her attire, the delicacy of her hands, the fineness of her cambric handkerchief, the

stamp of fashion upon her ornaments—all these trifles were noted by Sib and filled him with a sort of awe, which was at the same time a luxury.

He was so lost in contemplation of her that she softly repeated her question. There was a buzz of talk all round the table. Durnford and Hester conversed in low tones; Gretta and Wyatt were in animated conversation; Clephane, Mr. Reay, and Mollie held Nash's cattle under discussion. Sib wondered whether Gretta would ever tell Miss Gauntlet that, for a long time, her photograph had hung under the pedigree of Billy the bull, and determined to remove it upon his return to the Selection.

‘No, I've never been in England,’ he said, with his nervous bush-laugh. ‘I'm Australian born—what you'd call a corn-stalk.’

‘I shouldn't call you a ‘corn-stalk.’ I didn't think corn grew here. Isn't it too hot?’

‘Oh! Indian corn, maize. Leichardt's Land natives, the white ones, are nicknamed ‘corn-stalks’ because they are so long and thin. The Sydney ones are ‘green melons,’ and the Tasmanians ‘gum-suckers.’’

Isabel gave a little laugh.

‘Why?’ began Sib, and stopped, turning very red.

‘You are all so funny. It will take me a long time to learn your expressions and ways of thinking. Don't be angry. I like them.’’

‘Let me teach you,’ exclaimed Sib; and added dejectedly: ‘But it would not be worth learning, and you are better as you are.’’

A barking of dogs sounded outside, and through the open doors there floated a double cooee and the tramp of horses' hoofs.

CHAPTER XIX.

A ROMANCE OF BOHEMIA.

‘Who is our late visitor?’ said Mr. Reay.

‘It's Mr. Ferguson!’ cried Jinks, starting up in excitement from her chair, ‘That's his cooee. He taught me how to make it.’’ She pursed up her small lips, and gave forth in answer two long-drawn notes, followed by a short staccato call,

Cōo-ēe, coō-eē.

There was a little commotion in the dining-room. Sib went into the yard to welcome the new-comer. Hester sent out for fresh tea, and Jinks, who had been ordered off to bed, put on an expression of the utmost sweetness and solemnity:

“ If you please, dear gran’pa (I’m not talking to you; I’m talking to my gran’pa), please, dear gran’pa, may I not stay and hear if Pat is coming? you love good little girls, little girls who sit like this;” and she placed herself bolt upright, and began to twiddle her thumbs in a slow demure manner.

Gretta moved away, and stood silently in the shadow of the veranda.

Presently Sib re-entered, with him Ferguson, in riding costume, looking very stalwart, and a little embarrassed, but with something in his face which seemed to say that he had come for a purpose.

“ How about the muster, Jim?” asked Clephane. “ I thought you weren’t coming till next week.”

“ Why,” answered James, “ we have been drafting close here—up at the One-Eyed Waterhole. We got finished sooner than I expected. I didn’t think of it this morning. The rest are camping at the boundary fence; and as we brought in a strawberry cow, that I’m sure belongs to your milking-herd, Mr. Reay, I thought I’d drive her over, and ask you to give me a bed. I must start off before breakfast to-morrow.”

“ All right,” said Mr. Reay, “ I’m much obliged. You’ve saved Combo a day, by bringing in that strawberry cow. Go along to one of the spare rooms and wash your hands. If you had been half an hour sooner you’d have sat down with us. As it is, we’ll keep you company from the veranda. It’s much too hot for sitting in-doors. Bring out the grapes, Jinks, and my tobacco pouch.”

The night was still and clear. It had all the magnetism of a dry tropical eve, in which every waft of air seems charged with subtle electricity; when soul and body are sensitive to the most delicate impressions; and a look, a tone, a perfume, becomes an agent in that mystic world of half experiences which is the birthplace of emotions. The air was full of strange murmurings of ephemeral life, of soft rustlings, and of rich exotic odors mingling with the

more ethereal fragrance of aromatic gum and scrub-muntein blooming in the rockery. Now and then, there was the dull flop of a frog as it fell from the veranda eaves, or the whir of some uncanny insect circling toward the lighted door-ways. The moon, not yet at the full, sent filmy beams athwart the pathway; and the white pillars of *rinka sporum*, and the tall stakes, entwined by grotesque-limbed cacti, looked like radiant ghosts and uncouth goblins. Set low in heaven the Southern Cross appeared to touch the summit of Comongin; and high overhead shone Aldebaran, Orion, and the Scorpion's gemmed tail. Harmless summer lightning played round the peaks of Tieryboo, and the naked side of Knapp's Cliff gleamed like silver in the white light.

In front of the veranda a broad gravel-walk stretched from fence to fence, shaded at each end by orange and lemon-trees. In the center lay a heart-shaped flower-bed; and beyond, the trellised viney sloped gently down to a chain of tiny water-holes, fringed with swamp-oaks and sedgy grass. Hither, on pretense of finding their dessert, Gretta and Wyatt wandered. At first the fruit quest was sufficiently earnest, one bunch after another rejected, till fastidious Gretta announced that she was content; and, standing on the lagoon's marge, toyed prettily with the grapes, which she lifted one by one to her lips.

Gretta's moods were fitful. She had talked with so much animation to Wyatt at the close of dinner that their intimacy had made rapid strides; but now she seemed to have lost her vivacity. They were only a few yards from the house, though by reason of the intervening trellis, and the slope of the hill, the distance appeared greater, and they were completely hidden from view. Mr. Wyatt drew from his pocket a cigarette-case, mounted in old silver, which had a stamp of costliness and refinement, and asked permission to smoke. Gretta nodded silently. She noticed the case; cigarettes also were not in vogue on the Eura, and she liked the perfume of Wyatt's weed. Kneeling down, she stooped over the lagoon and dipped her fingers. He seated himself upon the stump of a felled tree, the trunk of which dropped into the water. As he slowly emitted thin wreaths of smoke he watched admiringly the graceful gestures with which she shook the water from her hands, and dried them upon her pocket-handkerchief. Frankly

unconventional as was Gretta's manner, it had no lack of dignity. He got up, and waited standing till she had seated herself lower down upon the tree-trunk. The little act of courtesy pleased Gretta. A lightning thought, of which the next moment she was ashamed, flashed through her mind: "A Eura bushman wouldn't have done that."

The voices in the veranda were audible—that of Ferguson sonorous and not unmusical, nor definitely colonial; although the accentuation of certain syllables, and the diminuendo closing a sentence, gave evidence as to nationality—then Mr. Reay's dry tones rising distinctly:

"And ye know that fellow Bowles? And he jest takes the calves from the mother, and keeps them six months, and then claps his brand on them. And now I ca' that na mair than cattle-stealing; and it's not a right thing—at least I don't think so."

Then Ferguson, with a sad and somewhat impatient accent, which moved Gretta to compunction:

"Oh, you are right, Mr. Reay. There's no doubt one has to keep a sharp lookout on Free Selectors, especially anywhere close to Wyeroo."

"This is very pleasant," exclaimed Wyatt, removing his cigar and breathing a sigh, half melancholy, half complacent; "we have chosen the better part. It's more than pleasant," he went on, "it's almost happiness. Do you know, Miss Reay, I have a theory that true happiness is quite incompatible with emotion. To be happy one ought to have arrived at a state of absolute passivity."

Gretta roused herself.

"The 'almost' is a concession to my vanity, I suppose. It would be distressing to think that I had reduced you, so soon, to a state of absolute passivity."

He drew in and expelled another whiff.

"For my own part," continued Gretta, "I like sensation. I want to see and feel everything. I want to lead the life of English people. I want to know what the world is, and what it can give me. I'd rather be miserable than dull."

"Oh! I too object strongly to dullness. There we are at one. And I had better own that if I rail against emotion it is because I feel keenly enough to know what reaction means."

Gretta eyed him with candid interest.

"You haven't got to that yet?" he said.

"I have got to nothing," she replied, frankly. "I am very ignorant of life."

"Yet you propose to teach me?"

"Only bush ways," she returned. "I don't think you have any right to call yourself a squatter." She laughed softly. "I wonder what you'd do if you were bushed. I am sure you wouldn't know how to follow down a watershed or guide yourself by the lie of the ridges."

"There's certainly a monotony in ridges."

"Not to Sib. He'd know one gum-tree from another along a track, and see a difference in every gully. I can't imagine you overlanding cattle! And then there are quantities of small things. I don't suppose it would ever occur to you to blow up a fire with your hat. Jack Clephane says that's an infallible sign of an Australian squatter. I dare say you don't know how to make a damper."

"That I can," cried Wyatt, triumphantly, "and eat it too—a far greater achievement. But I confess that I couldn't pass an examination. I bought a station without serving my apprenticeship as a new-chum, and I am lucky in having such a thorough-going partner as James Ferguson. He's a first-rate fellow, isn't he?"

"Yes," assented Gretta with a slight hesitation.

"Full of pluck and perseverance. I couldn't choose a better model, could I?"

"No!" said Gretta with decision.

"But two of us on the same pattern might be a little tedious. My conscience pricks me at the present moment. Instead of feeling almost happy here, I ought to be one of the veranda group improving my mind on the subject of Free Selectors. Oh please! Don't force me to leave this delicious spot," as she made a movement, "I am not going to begin work till after New-year's-day. Jim has given me a reprieve till then."

"I wonder that you came out to Australia," said Gretta, suddenly. "You don't like work; every one works here. You'll be very dull. And you must have led a pleasant life in England. At least, Mr. Blaize described you as—"

"Whirling in the vortex of London society. Yes, I know Gustavus's style. Won't you give me credit for having, like your brother-in-law, discovered the hollowness of civilization and the barrenness of Upper Bohemia?"

"Upper Bohemia!" she repeated, vaguely.

"That's a country with which you are not acquainted, Miss Reay. I know it well, and it represents London to me. I lived in it from the time I left Oxford till I came out to Australia two years ago. It's a region of vanity and humbug, cheap puffs, tall talk and artistic and literary shop, with mediocrity taking the airs of genius, and advertising itself upon every blank wall and in the sheets of every newspaper. 'Advertise thyself!' is the motto in the Old World nowadays. Life is nothing but Pears's Soap. I wanted to get away from Pears's Soap. Don't tell me that Adelina Patti and Mrs. Langtry will gaze at me from the outside cover of the 'Eura Chronicle.' I thought that I'd left them behind with the donkey-boys at Port Said. You look mystified, Miss Reay. Is it possible that you haven't heard of Pears's Soap?"

"Of course I have, and I know all about Mrs. Langtry and the rest of them. But I don't see what they have to do with it all."

"No," he answered, "but you would if you had lived in Bohemia. I am glad that you have not."

"Why? It seems to me that is just the sort of experience I am sighing for."

"They'd have turned you into a professional beauty, and I should perhaps have humbly sued for permission to paint your portrait in the hope of advertising myself."

"Did you paint portraits?"

"I have done a good many things. I once exhibited a picture in the Grosvenor Gallery. I wrote a play which was accepted and acted; and I published a novel that was flayed by the critics, and pronounced too improper for the circulating libraries."

"You wrote a play that was acted!" repeated Gretta.

"Is that so wonderful? It was a success into the bargain."

"Not wonderful that you should have written it, but to be successful! to be great! What did you want more?"

"More!" repeated Wyatt. "Success as a dramatist doesn't necessarily give one love—happiness. These are what a man wants out of life. The whole thing sickened me. Oh, the wire-pulling, the puppet-dancing, the petty rivalry and jealousy, the paint, powder, dirt, and unreality! My dear Miss Reay, if you knew as much about actors and

actresses as I do you wouldn't be astonished that I gave up catering for them. They are the death of Art."

"Oh, why?" exclaimed Gretta.

"They all want the middle of the stage, and worry the piece like a pack of hungry hounds. No one would write plays who hadn't got to earn his living. There's no satisfying the egregious vanity of a star. You must write him a part, and he must have Hamlet, Othello, Richard the Second, and Falstaff, all rolled in one. If Shakespeare were to come down from heaven, and offer Othello to a manager-star, he wouldn't take it, because Iago is too good."

"Oh!" said Gretta again, with the deepest interest.

"There must be only one part, and that for himself. That's why Hamlet is so popular. He has five mortal acts to rant in all by himself. Now I'll tell you why the ghost doesn't appear in the last act. Shakespeare took the part himself, and he was going to supper with Lord Bacon, and so cut the thing out. There's no other earthly reason that I can imagine. But it's very funny to be talking about the modern stage on the bank of an Australian lagoon. It seems incongruous. Hark! What is that?"

"It's the bell-bird," said Gretta, as a silver tinkle rolled across the flat. "Go on. I like hearing you talk about these things. I didn't think that you were so clever, and such a great person."

"I'm not clever; there's the mischief of it. I can never reach higher than flippancy. And you can't listen to shop-talk without inventing a shop of your own. It's a sort of epidemic connected with first nights and private views. May I relate my biography in theatrical style? For convenience' sake, as you are bound to know it sooner or later, I'll condense as much as I can."

He had risen, and stood in front of Gretta looking very tall, his brown face lowered, his eyes gleaming, a sort of subdued impetuosity in his air. He had the knack of throwing himself into picturesque attitudes, and presently moved a step lower, backing against a gum sapling which swayed under his weight, and added to the impression of power which in this mood he produced. Gretta's imagination was fired. He seemed to her the stuff out of which girls make heroes.

"Notwithstanding your sneers, Miss Reay," he began, "you are forced to own me as a compatriot. I was born

in New South Wales, and spent the first ten years of my life upon a Riverina station. I dare say you know that my father lost his life in the wreck of the 'Boomerang.' That is an historical wreck. You've heard how she struck within sight of the lights of home, and all on board went down"—his deep voice trembled a little. "It's very pathetic. My father had gone out to settle up his affairs. My mother had remained with me at home. She never returned here, and that is how I came to be educated in England. Some years later she married Grandoni the musician, and her house is one of the great musical and artistic centers in London. Well, to be brief, I left Oxford, and took up painting as a quasi-profession, studied in Paris and Rome, and might, perhaps, have done something had I had the incentive of poverty. I fell in love—disastrously. It is not necessary to go into detail. She was an actress. That was my play-writing period. She wanted to be advertised. I wrote the part for her, and it was a lucky hit. She mounted to a higher rung of the ladder leaving me behind. I wasn't rich enough or sufficiently ambitious to please her—perhaps I wasn't sufficiently in earnest. At any rate that episode turned my views into a practical channel. I had got a sickening of dilettanteism. As I don't come in for the best part of my fortune till after my mother's death, it seemed prudent to try and turn to account what money I had available. I couldn't stand harness, and investing in Australia seemed under the circumstances the most natural thing to do, though it was an odd jump from Bohemia to the bush. I came out as I mentioned with Governor Baldock, and accepted the temporary appointment as private secretary to His Excellency. I'm rather a cormorant in my craving for experience, and I had a curiosity to see something of viceregal life. It was amusing. I could make you laugh over some of the curious things which fall in the way of a colonial governor's private secretary."

Gretta laughed now, but with a little pique. She thought that Wyatt despised the Australians.

"Unfortunately for me the governor had a daughter," he went on. "You will see Miss Baldock in Leichardt's Town, so I'll make no attempt at describing her. I committed the indiscretion of admiring her. We became engaged. Of course her father disapproved. Grandoni was all very well as a performer at St. James's Hall or at pri-

vate concerts, but a closer connectionship he felt would be objectionable. There was a six months' battle ending in my defeat. Miss Baldock broke off the engagement during my absence in this colony."

Gretta uttered a sympathetic ejaculation, "Oh, why?"

Wyatt laughed with a good deal of bitterness in his voice, "Why? I can not tell you. We were apart, you know; and I was on probation as it were. There was some correspondence of a restricted kind. You know how women write under those circumstances—neither hot nor cold, and afraid of committing themselves. Her letters wounded me. It was evident that her trust in me had no root, and that she feared the future. If I could have gone to her— It is so much easier to speak than to write convincingly. Letters are the devil's invention for separating lovers. At any rate she wrote at last in a curt fashion, and broke it all off. And I was too proud to ask questions. I set sail for England as soon as I could. And now I've quite got over it, and am satisfied that it was neither her fault nor mine, but a wise dispensation of Providence."

"If," said Gretta, thoughtfully, "you found out now that she had loved you all the time, and that there had been a misunderstanding?"

He was silent for a moment or two. "It is possible," he said, slowly, "but not at all probable. I should not care to make that discovery. It would be like raking old ashes to see if an ember remained. Men's loves burn fiercely while they last, but they don't live without feeding. I have no doubt that by this time Miss Baldock has chosen more wisely. I have been singularly unfortunate, have I not?—and I had quite intended to make a new beginning. I had bought Gundalunda a little while before, as you know, in partnership with James Ferguson. My plan was to work there for a time, then to leave the management in his hands, and, after my marriage, to live in Sydney or Melbourne. I don't think you were up here when I came to take delivery?"

"I don't know," replied Gretta, simply. "No; I think that was my memorable season in Sydney." She added, after a pause—

"You will meet her again?"

"Not likely; though it wouldn't make any difference one way or the other. My wounds have been cauterized.

They don't smart; only the scars remain, as the poet puts it. I hope I haven't bored you. I wasn't sure whether you knew the story, and thought it would be easier to tell you now than later on, when we might all happen to be together in Leichardt's Town, and you would wonder at my not going to Government House. No, Miss Reay, frankly, I don't believe that is in the least my reason for deluging you with confidences. I am an egotistic person; I take it for granted that every one must feel an interest in me, and I was afraid—”

He halted an instant, and smiled ambiguously. . Gretta mentally filled in the blank:

“ You were afraid that I might fall in love with you,” and the unspoken words stung like nettles.

“ You looked sympathetic,” he continued, “ and I was afraid that you might withdraw your sympathy if I did not show you at once that I needed it.”

Before Gretta could reply, music sounded from the house, and some one began to sing the opening notes of a plaintive German serenade.

“ This was all we wanted to make the night perfect,” said Wyatt, throwing away the end of his cigar. “ A charming voice! Not powerful, but exquisitely trained. I hazard a guess that it belongs to Miss Gauntlett.”

“ There is no room for doubt,” said Gretta, moving on through the vines. “ Not one of us speaks or sings any language but her own.”

“ That is a delightful specimen of one type of English girl,” pursued Wyatt, “ the type one doesn't find in London—a young lady absolutely unaffected, and yet absolutely conventional, well bred and well educated, but without a spark of originality.”

“ Miss Gauntlett awes me,” said Gretta; “ I am filled with wonder and admiration when I look at the draping of her skirt. There is no doubt that English-cut clothes produce a solemnizing effect upon the Australian mind. And then her manners are as perfect as her dress. I am sure that, however much our aboriginal customs might jar upon her, she would be too well bred to show it, and that painful consciousness will add to her sufferings and intensify our humiliation. Don't you think we had better pack her up in cotton-wool and send her home again, labeled, ‘ Not calculated to stand rough usage ’?”

"I don't think you need be alarmed," replied Wyatt. "The poor little girl has probably been kept in leading-strings all her life, and is now enjoying the first thrill of freedom. She is like a caged bird set loose. If I may venture to prophesy, she will become so enamored of liberty that she'll end by marrying a rough, bearded squatter on the Barcoo, in order to escape from the luxurious dullness of Heatherleigh Court."

CHAPTER XX.

BITTER-SWEET.

FERGUSON was pacing the gravel stretch between the flower-bed and the veranda, and contributing an occasional remark to a discussion between Mr. Reay and Captain Clephane concerning the turf feats of a certain blood mare, which could only be settled by a reference to the *Eura "Racing Calendar."* He halted as Gretta and Wyatt approached. The latter gave him a careless nod.

"You are quite right, old fellow. This sort of thing is much better than camping out. I should think, Miss Reay, that there must be a good many cattle-camps within convenient reach of Doondi. You must have had a long day, Ferguson. Why do you make a martyr of yourself to-morrow?"

"It's a difficult beat. They couldn't get on without me."

"Oh, that is one of the delusions one shakes off with years. 'They' always get on very well without one at a pinch. But it is not for me to make cynical remarks. Your energy throws my laziness into unpleasant relief. However, as I know neither the country nor the cattle, I don't suppose that I could be of any real assistance to-morrow."

"No," replied Ferguson, "we are not short of hands. And you'll like stopping here." Unconsciously he cast a wistful glance at Gretta. "Nothing short of urgency on the part of butchers justifies one in collecting a mob at this time of year."

"Oh," said Gretta, in her soft mocking way, "butchers are the arbiters of Fate for us. Our livelihood, our happiness, depend upon butchers. One would gladly risk a sun-stroke rather than send a butcher away unsatisfied."

The music had ceased a few minutes ago. Wyatt passed into the parlor, where Isabel stood uncertainly by the piano, while Mollie sat with her work-basket on her lap; and Sib, a book upon his knees, longed that Isabel would play again, but dared not ask her.

Wyatt did so instead. He was passionately fond of music, and, moreover, possessed a fine tenor voice. He had been wondering who would play his accompaniments. Isabel's touch was extremely sympathetic. Gretta moved on a few steps with Ferguson. She stooped over the flower-bed and gathered a sprig of scented verbena, which she crushed between her hands, and delicately raised to her nostrils. Her pulse quickened a little as she glanced up at her companion. The expression of his face prepared her for an ebullition of feeling. There was something dramatic in the situation which frightened while it excited her. Gretta was a flirt. The trees and vines in the Doondi garden might, could they but speak, have described some curious love-scenes, but there are limits to flirtation, and Gretta's relations with James Ferguson had passed beyond those limits. He had been a part of her life, a background to her dreams, never anything more than a background, but always there between herself and the far-distant future. Now it was as though he had stepped out of perspective, and insistently obtruded himself upon her notice. There was something odd and incongruous in the position, quite at variance with her idea of kind, handsome, steadfast James, always tolerant of her humors, never swerving in his admiration, patiently waiting her pleasure, whose devotion had been a pleasant stimulant to existence, without causing any after reaction or disagreeable sense of humiliation.

A strange little tremor came over her. She made a movement as though she were about to re-enter the house. His pleading voice arrested her.

"Don't go in, Gretta. It seems such a long time since I have seen you. I was afraid you didn't mean to speak to me this evening."

"I have been making acquaintance with your partner. It was very nice of you to send him over. He has a fine flavor of European culture. I feel improved already. Doondi has been like a stagnant pool. It's time something happened. If it hadn't been for water-melons and the

thought of our Christmas gayeties I must have succumbed. You are all coming over next week, Aunt Judith and the rest. I've all sorts of plans in my head; I'm going to give the blacks a treat. Do let us have a good time and begin the New Year cheerfully. Do you know, Mr. Ferguson, I have a presentiment that it is going to be a particularly eventful year?"

She spoke hurriedly, and ended with a pretty, embarrassed laugh, as though there were some deeper meaning behind her light words. Ferguson's eyes met hers eagerly.

"When did you first feel your presentiment, Gretta? Last time that I was here I remember you boasted that of two weaknesses you were entirely free—and they were superstition and sentiment."

"So I am—in a general way; but this evening I could swallow a ghost or shed tears over poetry. It's the electricity in the atmosphere."

At that moment Hester and Mr. Durnford emerged from the shadow of the orange-trees, where they had been sitting. They were not talking. There was a feeling of restraint upon them, and their *tête-à-tête* had not been entirely rapturous. As yet the world of love was new to them, and they were timid—he of uttering a word which might imply unknightly advantage of her surrender, and she, fearful of this new joy, with which a vague sense of guilt and terror blended, fearful lest look or gesture might shadow the White Ideal which he sung.

They would have passed silently into the house—out of the dim crowd of formless desires and inarticulate thoughts which seemed to haunt the darkness, into the light, the music, the homely talk—but Gretta turning, and struck by something in their look which chimed with her mood, addressed the poet inconsequently.

"Mr. Durnford, you write a great deal about our affinity with Nature, magnetic thrills, et cetera. Tell me, isn't this a night for sympathies, weird influences, presentiments, and all the thing you poets make such a fuss about? I begin to believe in the unseen a little bit. There are times when unrealities seem the realities of life. You don't happen to have a divining-glass handy? What's the most tragical thing that could happen to us? Pleuro-pneumonia among the cattle? Alas, Billy the bull has been a victim already. A horde of Free Selectors? A passionate attach-

ment—stark, hopeless, and magnificent? We are all too commonplace for anything so romantic, except, perhaps, Hester, Mr. Gustavus Blaize, and you.’’ Gretta paused in confusion, suspecting that she had made an unfortunate remark. Durnford laughed awkwardly, and declared that it was cruel of her to make him profess mysticism as well as poetry. Surely he had endured chaff enough! and Gretta suddenly changed her tone.

“Hester, you look as white as a ghost, yourself. Is it the moonlight? And you are shivering with the thermometer at 95°!”

“I think that I am aguish,” faltered Hester. “I will go in.”

“Mrs. Murgatroyd has not yet got over the effect of her damp walk!” said Durnford.

“By the way!” exclaimed Gretta, “you never told us where you took shelter that day. Was it in the old shepherd’s hut?”

“No, it was —,” Hester began and halted, shrinking from the mention of that sanctified spot which she dreaded revealing to profane curiosity.

“I have discovered several eyries in the rocks near Point Row,” interposed Durnford. “I always like perching myself above the world when I want to read anything stiff. If you have any desire to turn hermit, Miss Gretta, I’ll engage to place two or three caves at your service.”

“That would be more in your line than mine,” retorted Gretta; “I have no intention of renouncing worldly vanities. You are going?” as he held out his hand.

“I have some work to do in order to keep pace with the boys to-morrow—exercises to correct. This is unusual dissipation for me. Good-night, Mr. Ferguson.”

“I hope you intend to be more sociable during the Christmas holidays,” said Gretta. “Don’t let Miss Gauntlett stop playing, Hester. I am going to stay out of doors a little longer, and meditate upon my presentiment. Life wasn’t meant to be dragged out between four walls on such a stifling night as this.”

She turned down the trellised path. Ferguson followed her. Durnford and Hester were left alone.

“You are ill?” he questioned, anxiously.

“No; I only feel strange—as if I were in a dream.”

"Tell me that you are happy. What would be the use of anything if I had made you sorrowful?"

"Yes, I'm happy. But I know that it is a dream. There seems something false. It's bitter-sweet."

His eyes pierced her soul.

"Oh!" she cried, "what have I said? I wound you."

"Truth before all!" he exclaimed.

"You say that?" she returned in a peculiar tone.

"I do say it—with the strength of all my convictions. We stand upon a mountain while we are true to each other. God is above us—the world below. Bitter-sweet!" he went on vehemently. "Did I not know that? It was why, for your sake, I meant to leave you. Did I not know that soul and body would be in perpetual agonizing strife? There's the falseness."

"Yes," she said, wearily; "that is it. There's always a struggle—the position is false."

"To me that is nothing," he exclaimed. "Love should transcend it; I've thought the matter out and faced the penalty—as a man can; a woman's different. You only feel it like a dumb animal or a child in darkness. If it's too hard for you we'll part."

"Part! No, oh no! I could not bear it. You are noble; you see the stars; I will try to remember: God above—the world below us."

"Then you decide? I will not leave you!" he cried, passionately. "You will meet me at the cave to-morrow? I saw that my evasion jarred upon you. Consider; it is our refuge from the world—it should be sacred. Do you know that I spent yesterday afternoon in exploring, and I have found a much easier ascent. Dream sweetly, my Hester. Think of the hour of happiness which will be ours to-morrow. You have been silent, oppressed to-night. These shadows will vanish away. I have so much to hear—so much to tell you. You fill me with high, pure thoughts. You teach me to understand myself. You explain the fevered dreams which have made my life kaleidoscopic. Through you I reach eternity. Good-night—till to-morrow."

"Till to-morrow," she echoed; and he left her.

CHAPTER XXI.

“ FOR GLANCE OF THINE A WORLD.”

Down by the lagoon Gretta and Ferguson were sitting. Not at the spot where Bertram Wyatt had told his story a little while before. Gretta, moved by an impulse which she would have been at a loss to analyze, turned away from this natural halting-place; and the two strolled on to the very verge of the garden, where a palisade covered with prickly pear divided it from the home-paddock.

The unshapely leaves and twisted limbs of the cactus rose high—an effectual rampart against the cattle and horses congregated round the water-hole. Here the larger lagoon widened, and, unshadowed by sheoaks, it formed the foreground to an extensive tract of plain studded by gaunt dead gums, tiers of forest wolds, and beyond, the fortress-like summit of Comongin.

Gretta’s eyes rested affectionately upon this familiar feature of the landscape.

“ I wonder,” she said, suddenly, “ whether I should miss old Comongin much if I were to go away from here forever? Somehow, he seems to belong to me, and I should feel it a kind of treason to forget him. I think that I like him better than anything else upon the Eura.”

They were sitting upon a rustic bench—a slab laid across two stumps. Overhead, a ti-tree spread its gnarled branches and dipped its bottlebrush-blossoms into the glassy water. It was very still, except for the whirring of insects about them, the faint sound of voices and music from the house, and an occasional splash or stealthy gliding under the lily leaves, which told of the movement of some reptile—and Ferguson’s warning against snakes, as they sat down, was not unnecessary.

“ Why do you talk like that?” he asked with emphasis.

“ I don’t understand. How?”

“ You seem full of ideas. Fate—presentiments—going away.”

“ It isn’t reasonable to suppose that I’m going to spend my whole existence on the Eura. I don’t know what puts going away into my head to-night. It’s my mood.”

" You aren't usually given to moods. I always find you the same."

" Oh, that sounds very monotonous. What am I like in my normal condition, James?"

" Clever, bright, capable, getting at the heart of everything, and being gay and agreeable in so unconscious a way that it would be impossible to imagine you taking life seriously—"

" Oh, you don't know me in the least," she interrupted.

" I was going to say: if one hadn't an intuitive feeling that there was a great deal more under the surface."

" That's true; but you have only told me good things; now the bad points."

" I don't think that there is anything specially bad about you," he said, slowly; " and if there were I shouldn't be the one to find it out."

She waived the latter part of his remark.

" That's just it!" she cried. " I'm not specially good nor specially bad. I'm curious about the world. I want to have experiences. I want to be quite sure what is the first-best thing in life before I drop down to the second or third-best. Do you see, James?"

" Yes," he answered sadly, " I see."

" If I tell you a secret, you mustn't ever bring it up against me," continued Gretta. " It is that I am very impressionable down to a certain depth. The outside of me is soft—the inside is granite. I'm very fond of excitement and the sense of power. If I can't get excitement out of big things, as I should like to do, I take it out of small ones, and despise myself for my pains."

" One wouldn't think you took pains," he said. " If that were so your power would be less. It's your unconsciousness. You don't even seem to see that you are giving pain, and you often do, and, I think, know it. But that's a part of you, and I don't mind it—if you weren't a little heartless you wouldn't be Gretta Reay."

Gretta moved slightly; she had been leaning forward, her chin upon her hands.

" This is very interesting; I like being analyzed. But it's rather hard of you to insinuate that my unconsciousness is a sham. I do not hurt people willfully. I'm not bad enough for that. If they put themselves in my way and

expect from me what I have not to give, is it my fault that they are disappointed?"

He did not answer. She went on impetuously.

" You are all so narrow in your ideas. You speak and act as though the Eura district were the only place in the universe, and Gretta Reay the most important person in it."

" I have no doubt," returned Ferguson, " that if the Eura squatters could realize that the world is wide, and contains millions of charming young women, they would bear their disappointment more philosophically. But it is hard to be philosophical under some circumstances, and I'm ready to admit that bushmen are not imaginative. They don't see further than their horizon."

Gretta altered her position, and drew further back against the ti-tree.

" I remember, long ago, when we first came here," she said, thoughtfully. " I was nine years old, but dreadfully ignorant, and much more fanciful than I am now. I used to fancy that the world lay just on the other side of the mountains—the world of story-books—and that if I could only get round Comongin all sorts of things would happen to me; and I should think and feel quite differently—life would be altogether more vivid. I have that fancy still sometimes."

" Gretta," said Ferguson, stolidly, " it isn't you, yourself—your goings and comings, the place of your abode, the sights you see—which will make that world a reality to you. It's only love which can do that; and the man who succeeds in making you care for him will open the door for you."

" I dare say you are right," she answered, " but how did you arrive at that conclusion? I didn't know that you thought of such things."

" I only think of them when I think of you," he answered simply.

" I hope that you don't class me as one of those morbid-minded girls one reads of—always hungering after emotion. I suppose there's a sort of fascination in the idea of being in love. I think so till I reason about it—then I hate it."

" Why should you hate it?" he asked, quietly.

" It would be bondage. I couldn't be a slave. And then the feverishness of it—hot and cold fits; burning and shivering; one's heart on fire; and, after all, a handful of

cinders left. A tragedy! In books, that kind of thing always ends in tragedy. You can't fit a magnificent passion on to sober married life—such as people would live on the Eura."

"I think that tragedies and magnificent passions are possible even on the Eura."

"No, no, James, never! Tragic heroes don't wear mole-skins and cabbage-tree hats. You couldn't imagine a hero patching his saddle and smoking store-tobacco, or a heroine serving out rations to the hands or stirring pie-melon jam. By the way, do you like it flavored with essence of lemon or ginger? You can have your choice."

"Tell me your idea of a hero, Gretta?"

"He must be caviare to the general," she replied, promptly; "a figure of speech which is applicable in more ways than one. We don't often get such luxuries on the Eura—and how unpopular he would be in the district!" she laughed softly. "Of course, he must be a product of civilization, handsome, world-worn, a little oppressed by the number and variety of his experiences. In fact, he ought to excite one's curiosity besides rousing one's admiration. He should have stretched-out feelers in all directions; and should have fine ideas about art, as well as all the manly graces, and most of the manly virtues."

"Your description makes me think of Bertram Wyatt," said Ferguson; "I don't know why, unless it is that he is artistic, and certainly the product of civilization."

Gretta flamed out,

"You are quite mistaken. Do you suppose that I meant to be understood literally? Your remark proves at least that bushmen have no imagination. My hero was up in the air—the sum total of the last set of novels you lent me."

Ferguson received her rebuke meekly:

"I beg your pardon. It was natural my thoughts should turn to Wyatt."

There was a note of suppressed anxiety in his voice. He seemed about to say more, but checked himself. The vague uneasiness to which he had been a prey ever since his arrival could hardly be termed jealousy. It had occurred to him long ago that Gretta's anti-colonial prejudices would predispose her toward his partner; but he believed, upon Wyatt's own assertion, that the latter's heart was entirely

given to Miss Baldock, and that he lived in the hope of again meeting her and renewing their engagement, for the rupture of which he held her father responsible. Ferguson's opinion might have become modified had he been a listener to Wyatt's tentative confidences by the lagoon; but, even so, it would have been difficult for him to conceive that such affection as Wyatt had professed could waver so rapidly. Scorn of pettiness, and a sentiment of loyalty, barred his lips against detraction of a possible rival; but the triumphant thought, "He is weak and I am strong," flashed through him and gave him courage.

Gretta noticed his preoccupied air, and partially divined what was passing through his mind. She felt within herself an embarrassing consciousness that forced her into a curious sympathy with his mood. She stole a look at his averted face, and was struck by its frank fearlessness. He sighed, drawing himself up as if with new determination; and she was moved by an impulse almost of tenderness:

"Don't let us talk any more in this stupid fashion. And you look so serious. Have you ridden far? Are you tired?"

"Yes," he answered to her last question, "not with my day's riding, but with the burden of hope deferred."

"Ah! now, James, you are talking like a hero."

"Gretta," said the young man, passionately, "don't mock at me. I am in deadly earnest. What are we all living and longing for but happiness? And happiness is love! You think that there can be no romance on a cattle-station. You are looking for it beyond Comongin. And it is here—at your side. I understand you, Gretta. I love you, and I mean to try and make you love me."

"You said something like this once before, James, and I begged you not."

"You bade me wait, and I have waited. I'll wait longer—years if you choose. But something has been tearing at me all day. I felt that I must see you and tell you all that was in my heart. I, too, have had a presentiment."

"Tell me about it, James."

"It came with a dream I had last night. I often dream of you, Gretta. I feel your hand in mine. I see you smiling at me. You are always sweet and kind in my dreams. It is hard to believe when I awake that you don't care for me. I will not believe it."

"Tell me your dream," she questioned softly.

"I thought we were standing on the deck of a ship. I held you close to me. I knew that we were very happy, and that somehow you belonged to me. The sea was so blue; there were tiny wavelets flecked with foam; and the air was fresh, and a little cold, just as it is here in the early spring mornings. On one side of us there was a long line of lovely coast; blue hills, some in shadow, some bare and glistening; a gray road, winding beneath rocky precipices, with curious round pines here and there; or the ruins of some old castle perched upon an overhanging cliff. Oh! it was like nothing we have ever seen. Down by the shore there were villages and gardens, quaint bridges, and rivers winding down from the hills. And then, far off, there rose snow-clad peaks like thrones in heaven; and the light of the rising sun upon them seemed God's glory resting there. It was Italy, Gretta—I seemed instinctively to know that, and the sun was rising for us over a new world."

Gretta leaned forward again; her eyes bright, her parted lips trembling. His vivid word-painting had carried her away.

"Italy!" she repeated, "and you saw all this? It must have been beautiful, James."

"It was beautiful, because you were beside me," Ferguson went on, kindling with the eloquence of love; "a new world for you and for me—but old—old as history, and full of the romance you long for. Gretta, will you come? Will you marry me? and see with me all that we've read and dreamed of—then come back to old Comongin and the Eura? Oh, Gretta! I am not the sort of hero you painted. I'm a rough Australian; and all that I know of life in Europe, of art, and of romance—except the romance of loving you, and that seems to me the noblest and loveliest on earth—I've learned from books. But perhaps I know as much as most fellows of all that's worth knowing; and perhaps I'm all the better and truer for not being the product of civilization. It seems to me that there's a kind of chivalry which can be practiced in the bush here better than in great cities—the chivalry Tennyson writes about—the knighthood that isn't earned by sauntering through life in a graceful, smiling way with your heart in your hand, but in simplicity and faith, by love of one woman and reverence of all women for her sake. It may sound high-flown and

absurd, but that's how I feel in my love for you. It wakes up all the religion and enthusiasm that's in me."

At the moment the young man's face seemed transfigured; his fine eyes glowed; his voice quivered with earnestness. Gretta's being was stirred. For a second its depths had been reached. The influence of the hour wrought upon her; the music sounding at intervals—weird bits of Chopin, snatches from Beethoven's sonatas, wild, strong and with a burden so human and yearning, that every note chimed with the lover's pleading; the dim distance of plain and forest, the soft lapping of the water, as the ti-tree branches dipped deeper under their weight; the heavy perfume of datura flowers, the throbbing life which lurked beneath every leaf, and seemed to pulse with theirs.

Involuntarily, Gretta held forth her hands. They were clasped in his.

"Jem," she said in a shaken voice, "it is beautiful. It would be beautiful—if—if only I loved you."

"I've thought of that, Gretta. I'm not afraid if you'll trust me, and trust yourself. I know it's a received notion, a sort of canon of romance, that love should be a magnetic affinity, and that the passion should be equal on both sides. That isn't my idea. It doesn't seem to me natural that a gentle, innocent girl like you should have the almost uncontrollable feelings which tell a man that there's but one woman in the world for him. Durnford expresses what I mean in one of his poems. It's the lover's fiery all-embracing love which melts the woman's heart, and, by degrees, draws it into union with his own. *I know,*" he exclaimed, vehemently, "that if we were married, if even we were engaged, after a little time you wouldn't hesitate to own that you loved me. Gretta, wouldn't it be so?"

"It might be so," murmured Gretta, dreamily; "you're very strong, Jem, stronger than I thought. Perhaps you could do it. You lift me off my feet—almost."

The words fell brokenly. Gretta's impulses were at war. To yield would be sweet. And yet—A woman's instinct is truer than a man's logic. Silence followed, which wrapped them round, and, as it were, placed them in a shadowy circle, over which winged thoughts hovered. The music had ceased and the voices in the veranda died down to a murmur. Suddenly, a few brilliant chords resounded. Some one began to sing. The sense of solitude was no

more. It was a man's voice—Wyatt's—a tenor, rich and cultivated, and there was a trick about the song, an absence of rhyme and irregularity of stanza, a lawlessness and *entrain* which made it thrill Gretta's ears like no other song she had ever heard.

"Then come to me, come to me altogether," uttered Ferguson, at the white heat of his longing.

He rose from the slab, still holding her hands, and drawing her upward. For an instant Gretta swayed toward him. It was a moment of crisis. Was it the voice of her lover, or that of the singer which she obeyed?

"For glance of thine, a world,
For smile of thine, a heaven,
For kiss of thine—"

Passion broke the strain.

"For kiss of thine—"

And then, from wooing tenderness the tones swelled as if in ecstasy.

"I know not
What I would give for a kiss."

Gretta wrenched her hands from Ferguson's grasp.

"No, no!" she cried, "I can not. I have been cruel. I have deceived you. I deceived myself for a few moments. I can not love you. It was wicked for me to promise."

She darted from him through the vines, and Ferguson stood alone by the lagoon.

CHAPTER XXII.

GOOD-BYE, GRETTA.

AT Doondi-no one slept much after daybreak.

First there was the roaring of the cattle imprisoned in the stock-yard. It had indeed gone on without intermission all night, but seemed to intensify at dawn. Then came the loud cracking of the stock-whip, with which Mr. Reay awoke the station-hands. He himself was always first out, and prided himself upon the amount of gardening, beef-salting, or such other work as was peculiar to the head-station,

which he accomplished before breakfast. Meanwhile the laughing jackasses had started their chorus, and all the small birds were twittering. The dogs were on the alert, and black boys' voices might be heard. Now, more cracking of whips, a stampede of horses on their way to the yards, and the lowing of milkers being fetched up from the paddock, and presently, the clatter of zinc pails which the boys were taking from the dairy to the stock-yard.

This was Gretta's signal. To-day, as she came out of her bedroom, and stood in the fresh morning light, it might have been evident to any one who cared to notice her face that she had passed a sleepless night. She looked pale and her eyes were heavy, and the lids reddened. But she would not admit to herself that it was anything except the intense heat, which made her languid and nerveless.

The early hours gave pitiless warning of glare and discomfort. No dew had fallen during the night. A blue haze clung to the mountains, telling of distant bushfires. The red blossoms of a pomegranate-tree offended the eye, and already the more tender flowers drooped.

Gretta stepped down from the veranda into the little court-yard where Mr. Reay was tying up a straggling creeper.

"Good morning, Gretta," he called out; "I was coming to look after you. You're late this morning; and you'll have a job with the butter. Jack Clephane has gone off to Tieryboo in a fright lest the fires should get at his fences. Do you see them over Doonbah way?"

"Yes, father," said Gretta, listlessly, and passed on to the steps, at the foot of which Maafu was standing with a pail of clear water that he had drawn from the water-bag.

"Take it down to the dairy, Maafu," said Gretta, halting by the wicket—a pretty object in her blue cotton-gown and big apron, which partly concealed and partly drew attention to her slender form. She was gazing in the direction of the stock-yard, trying to identify the coatless figures passing to and fro outside the great posts and battens. Among them she discerned that of Ferguson. He had not gone then. Glancing toward the veranda, she saw his saddle hanging over the rails, and his valise, unstrapped, beside it. The color flamed in Gretta's cheeks. He was coming down from the yard, leading his horse. She flew across to the dairy as he, seeing her, began to quicken his steps.

Through the cheese-cloth which covered the little window she furtively watched him saddle his horse and buckle on the valise. He bade Mr. Reay good-bye, then, still leading his horse, walked down to the bark-roofed hut, where Gretta stood making believe to be very busy with her milk-pans. Having fastened his bridle to the veranda-post he entered. He looked pale, too, under his sunburn, and worn—but his mouth was determined.

“I’ve come to bid you good-bye,” he said, “and I have a few words to say to you, Gretta, before I start, if you don’t mind. Would you rather I didn’t come over at Christmas, as we had arranged?”

“Oh, James!” she exclaimed, putting down the skimmer with which she had been operating, “we are going to be friends still, aren’t we?”

“We are going to be friends forever, I hope—no matter what happens. But I didn’t know quite what you felt about last night, or whether you mightn’t wish me out of your sight for a little while. Of course I’ll do exactly as you wish, though I don’t see that it need make any difference.”

“No difference at all, James, if you’ll put it out of your head and not be angry with me.”

“I couldn’t be angry with you, Gretta, under any circumstances. But for the other—that’s just what I want to say to you. I can’t consider myself beaten, and I don’t mean to give you up—I love you far too well.”

He waited as if for a word from her, but she said nothing. He went on,

“I dare say you think me unmanly and conceited for my pertinacity. It doesn’t matter. That won’t alter me. I know you like me a little bit or you would not look at me in the way you sometimes do. You wouldn’t have put your hand in mine as you did last night—”

“James,” interrupted Gretta, “I’ll tell you the truth. You mustn’t place any dependence upon my manner. I can’t help wishing people to like me, and liking them till they go too far. I am horribly impulsive; and, as I said last night, I’m impressionable to a certain point. Sometimes I have fancied—last night for instance—that you had dragged me past it. But the feeling never lasts. I’m not worth caring for. I’m a weak, heartless creature.”

"You are not heartless, Gretta; and, please God, I'll prove it," said Ferguson, solemnly.

"I don't believe any person would ever satisfy me," continued Gretta; "it's a dreadful confession, but it's true."

"How can you tell?"

"Oh, I often try to analyze myself. That's how I employ my mind when I am skimming the cream and turning the churn-handle. If I were married I suppose that my husband would want the whole of me. It would be impossible for us to touch at all points, especially if he were a squatter. I hate cattle. I should be putting feelers out in another direction. I'm very diffusive. I can't bottle up my impressions. If one person doesn't give me sympathy I must get it from another. Sometimes you draw out one bit of me, and then I think you might make me happy. The next day another side of my nature is uppermost, and you are—nowhere. In fact I'm as unreasonable as the cat in 'Andersen's Tales.' I expect every one to purr and give out sparks. I have no doubt I shall learn in time that it isn't actually necessary to happiness for your companions to be always purring and giving out sparks. But I haven't learned the lesson yet. Do you understand? I want to see the world. I dare say that afterward I may be contented to settle down on the Eura."

"I will show you the world. We will see it together."

"I spoke figuratively, James. I don't mean traveling from one country to another—at least, not entirely. But we can not see the world in my way without making an experiment which might prove a failure."

"I will wait till you have made your experiment," said Ferguson.

"And have come back ready to put up with the second-best," rejoined Gretta, her mind reverting to the episode of the previous evening.

"Ah!" said Ferguson, his eye brightening, "I feel that, under the circumstances, with time and opportunity, I should be capable of taking the first place. Come to me after months, years, say to me 'Jem, I have made a mess of my experiment, and I am obliged to fall back upon you.' Just see, then, whether I should shrink from being your second-best!"

Gretta took up the skimmer again, and, slipping it be-

neath the clotted surface, dexterously separated cream from thick milk, and dropped the former into an earthen bowl by her side.

“Jem,” she said, seriously, “you must give me up.”

“No, Gretta,” he replied with equal gravity, “I’ll never do that while you are unmarried. But I’ll put a curb upon myself, and you shall be troubled no more—not for a long time, at all events—by any expression of my feelings. I’ll wait and watch, and we will be brother and sister as we have always been.”

Gretta frankly put her hand in his for a moment.

“Yes, Jem, brother and sister, and nothing else. Remember, I’ve told you to give it up. If I haven’t been quite loyal to you, forgive me. It’s a little hard for a girl like me to keep from flirting. The bush is dull, you know, and I never was staid like Mollie. I always wanted to have a good time, and to make cake out of my bread. You’ll not remind me of yesterday evening, will you? I want to forget it. I was sorry—yes—I’ll own it. I lay awake last night crying, and thinking that there is something contemptible in letting men make love to me—getting what fun I can out of them, and then turning them away. I don’t think any of them bear me any grudge, though,” she added, lightly, “not even Old Gold.”

“It’s that unconscious way you have, Gretta. I said so before. You don’t seem to know when you are hurting people. You never seem to be aware of it, when you are doing a thing that is not conventional.”

“You can’t take Mrs. Grundy out riding with you, James. She would be out of place on the Eura.”

“No,” James hesitated for a moment—“but I think it would be better, Gretta, if you didn’t sit out alone in the evening with fellows, down by the lagoon, as you do.”

“Jem,” said Gretta, solemnly, “if I were to try and count upon my fingers how many men had proposed to me down by the lagoon I couldn’t do it.”

She passed on to another of the tin pans, and, drawing off its muslin covering, poured some water from Maafu’s pail upon a shapeless curd-like mass of butter, yesterday’s churning. She rolled up her sleeves, and looked down in perplexity at her hands, then up at the door-way; which a figure darkened. It was Bertram Wyatt.

"Good morning, Miss Reay. You see I have begun my training by getting up with the sun."

"Then you have been a long time dressing," said Gretta, "for the sun rose more than an hour ago."

"Oh, I've had a swim in the creek, and I stopped for a patter with the blacks. There's a romance down at the camp. One Pompo, a most gay and gallant nigger, has eloped with a bride from over the border, who, being a Haggi—and he a Hippi—isn't that it, Miss Reay?—has been forbidden him by his tribe. He is the hero of the hour, and the dusky pair are enjoying their honey-moon, worrying a kangaroo-tail and defying fate. Mrs. Pompo says that her lord is a 'budgery benjamin,' and he declares that he wouldn't exchange her for a White Mary. I wonder how long it will be before he hits her over the head with a waddy?"

Gretta laughed, but still looked at her hands.

"Mr. Wyatt," she exclaimed, "I want to scald my fingers. Perhaps you don't know that half the art of butter-making is to dip your hands first into very hot water and then into cold. As you are a man and a brother go over to the kitchen and fill me this dipper out of the kettle."

Wyatt took the tin utensil which she held out to him and moved to do her bidding.

"I don't suppose," observed Gretta, thoughtfully, "that he is accustomed to being sent by girls to the kitchen for a dipperful of water."

"Good-bye, Gretta."

"Must you go, Jem? Won't you have some breakfast first?"

"No, thank you. I shall get to the camp in time to boil a billy of tea before we start out."

"Have some milk, then. Here it is, fresh down from the yard."

Maafu had just entered and deposited a brimming pail upon the floor of the dairy.

Gretta filled a pannikin. He drank it.

"Don't forget, Jem, that we are to see the New-year in from the top of Little Comongin range."

"I'm coming over on Tuesday, Gretta. Remember what I said. Don't be hard on people, dear. Don't give any one the chance of being hard on you."

Ferguson's voice was husky. Gretta's big, brown eyes softened, her lips drooped; she looked like a child who had been scolded.

"Jem, you're not very unhappy? I couldn't bear to think I had made you so. Oh, Jem, forget last night. There's a real, steaming Christmas before us. Let us pray for thunder-storms and enjoy ourselves. I have a queer sort of feeling that Gretta Reay's butterfly existence is coming to an end, and that her life is going to be a more serious sort of affair. Now, Maafu, quick! The strainer. Pour the milk in steadily and don't splash my frock. Good-bye, Mr. Ferguson."

Gretta was herself again. She rarely called him Jem, except when they were alone or some deeper chord had been struck in their intercourse, although their joint relationship to Mrs. Blaize, and the freedom of their bringing-up, might at all times have sanctioned the familiarity.

Ferguson mounted his horse, and, passing through the upper slip-rails, was soon lost to view. But his heart was heavy, and the image of Gretta among her milk-pans clung to him like a sorrowful memory.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LOBSTER-FISHING IN THE PADDOCK.

BEFORE a week had gone by both Isaac and the stern old Bertram Wyatt were thoroughly domesticated executioner ~~and~~ ⁱⁿ axioms that

It was not difficult to conform to the ~~new~~ ^{old} ~~his~~ ^{their} routine of the household. In reference to most things, there reigned a delightful spirit of freedom, though it was easy to see that, with regard to station matters and questions of importance, Mr. Reay was an autocrat. Each member of the family seemed to have his or her separate occupation, and in the day-time the head-station was comparatively peaceful. Sib spent most of his time at the Selection, and the boys were all day at work with their tutor, who, in his turn, only put in an appearance after dinner. Of the three sisters, Mollie Clephane, absorbed in her needle-work, her devotion to her husband, and her housewifely plans, was perhaps the most amiable and the least interesting. Gretta was the practical head of domestic affairs. Always

bright, never idle, except during legitimate siesta time, with a laugh ready upon the smallest provocation, a quick perception of the ludicrous, and a pretty vein of sentiment, which gave womanliness to her character—Gretta was a fascinating study to the English girl, who could not understand the utter unconventionality, the childish audacity, the worldly shrewdness, and the vivid imagination, of her Australian cousin. To Gretta, Isabel appeared stiff, and sometimes aggressively superior. Isabel did not take kindly to after-dinner rambles and fearless flirtation, the openness of which rescued it from the imputation of vulgarity, but which was, nevertheless, opposed to the notions of propriety which had been inculcated at Heatherleigh. In fact, they were both, as yet, a little afraid of each other, though each secretly admired the other.

Hester Murgatroyd seemed always distant and dreamy, a strange compound of impulsiveness and reserve, somewhat lazy in her habits, taking small part in the family jokes and amusements, yet giving the impression of a fund of enthusiasm held in leash by nervous dread of coldness or ridicule. She was of a metaphysical turn of mind, and would spend hours of the afternoon, lying half-dressed at full length on the matting, a translation of the "Phædo" before her, and a plate of muscatel grapes by her side. There was a certain delicate sensuousness about Hester which contrasted oddly with her air of other-worldliness, and might have furnished a key to unsuspected capabilities. She was addicted to solitary rambles, in ~~the~~ proposed to join her. Once, when Isabel ~~per~~ ~~ex~~ company, she was nervously rebuffed, and Gretta ~~re~~med in a bantering tone.

"Oh! you ~~must~~ get used to Hester's fads. She has a notion that it's philosophical to walk by herself in a circle, and looks upon a round of the race-course as the symbol of eternity. If you went with her you'd prevent her from ranting among the gum-trees, and that would be a serious loss to the opossums."

Yet in the attitude of the whole family toward Hester there was a kind of wistful tolerance that was pathetic. No one seemed to expect anything from her, all made allowance for her peculiarities. Mr. Reay, hard in manner, and a disciplinarian toward all except the females of the Head Station, never interfered with his eldest daughter's pur-

suits, or hinted that she might employ her time with greater advantage to the community. He was always gentle, if a little distant, in his manner to her, and occasionally consulted her upon an abstract topic, never upon anything closely related to their every-day life. She might have been a visitor instead of being the ostensible head of the establishment, and it was very evident that there was no real sympathy between father and daughter. A wall had once divided them, and it had never been completely broken down. Hester Murgatroyd, received again into her old home and reinstated in her position as a daughter of the house, could, nevertheless, in no sense be looked upon as Hester Reay. Deep in his heart Duncan Reay cherished an implacable animosity against the scoundrel for whose sake his daughter had deceived him. He had rejoiced over Lance Murgatroyd's shame, had regretted the expiration of his term of imprisonment, and would willingly have given him again over to the law had he possessed the power. It is a curious illustration of the strange workings of a woman's heart, that, though Hester hated and despised her husband, she resented this attitude of her father, and, even in her sorrow and humiliation, ranged herself unconsciously against him. An inflexible conformity to justice was Mr. Reay's most striking characteristic. He had no pity for youthful excesses. If his boys got into debt they had to suffer for it. If by folly, or cowardice, they brought trouble upon themselves, he would do nothing to soften their punishment. It was one of his favorite sayings, "a man must stand on his own bottom;" a saying which a Roman who delivered up his son to the executioner would have been considered by him worthy of the highest reverence.

Though hotter than usual, even for the season of year, this was a busy time at Doondi. The mustering for the northern station was in swing. Every morning Captain Clephane—equipped for the part, and completely in his element—would set forth at the head of a tribe of stockmen, black boys and dogs; and his return in the afternoon, 'mid such a cracking of whips, bellowing of beasts, and yelling of men, that it could be heard miles off, was the signal for Mr. Reay to leave the garden, or cultivation paddock, and repair to the yards, where he would have tough sticks and extra hands in readiness for the drafting. Isabel found it

a curious experience to watch from afar the process of yarding a mob—the surging red-brown mass, a sea of tossing horns and laboring backs; the outriders, their stock-whips writhing in the air, and at each stroke sending a report to echo through the gum-trees; the wild dashes hither and thither; the break-neck gallops after refractory beasts; the uproar and confusion round the yard itself—men, horses, cattle, and brandished staves in wild medley; then, when all was over, the jog down to the house, the dismounting of grimy riders, the unsaddling of tired beasts, and bathing of their sunbaked ribs and inflamed backs with cold water from the cask; and finally the sally down the creek, and, when the dinner-bell rang, the return of tired bushmen, refreshed, clean, reclothed, and in a sociable humor.

In the saddle from dawn to sundown, to say nothing of the physical exertion involved in yelling and stock-whip-cracking! It seemed to Isabel Gauntlett that the Eura squatters worked harder than any English laborer she had ever known.

Mr. Wyatt, as in duty bound, offered the mustering-party his help, but it was declined on the ground that, as he did not know the country, he could be of but little use. Glad enough was he to avail himself of the plea and to devote himself to the service of the ladies.

He found it a pleasant lounging sort of life. During the morning, a little desultory music with Isabel in the drawing-room, while Gretta would pass to and fro in her big apron and straw hat, occasionally calling upon him to gather a basket of grapes or to chastise a kangaroo-hound which threatened to damage the garden, or to shell a cob of Indian corn for the regalement of the fowls outside the fence. Mrs. Clephane, in the veranda, sewed, and chided Jinks; and Hester Murgatroyd wandered about rearranging the flowers, or reclined in the hammock with a book.

And then, in the afternoon, the siesta and smoke, the awakening at five o'clock, and saunter to the croquet-ground—for in the bush, in those days, tennis was not—the canter in the cool of the day, or the stroll by the creek in search of late mulgams, when, no matter how the party had been re-enforced Gretta and Wyatt usually found themselves carrying on one of those dreamy conversations which, when prolonged under the orange-trees and down by the

lagoon after dinner, made them know each other in a week as well as though their acquaintanceship had extended over years of ordinary intercourse.

It was the afternoon of the day upon which Mr. Ferguson and Mr. and Mrs. Blaize were expected, and the house-party were in the veranda, overcome with the heat and disinclined to move out of the squatters' chairs and hammocks. Jinks sidled up to Isabel and commenced conversation in her discursive fashion. Jinks had been a little less irrepressible of late, and spent a good deal of time in silently watching Isabel. Maafu had distinctly discouraged her scheme for transforming herself into a "fair one with golden locks," and his graphic representation of the obvious reasons in his own case for using lime-wash had somewhat disgusted her with the operation.

"Are you stetic? We are all getting stetic because my governess is going to be married, and she is working sunflowers. Have you got lots of jewelry, and cups and saucers, and brittles, and things in your home in England? Tell me what your parlor is like."

Isabel described the drawing-room at Heatherleigh in a manner which set Jinks's imagination working, and brought forth many questions and remarks. What did she mean by curtains? Were they mosquito-curtains? They didn't have any others at Doondi. And who were the pictures of? And what was china? And did she mean that the floor was quite covered with carpet, and that there wasn't a sewing-machine handy? And was she quite sure that tarantulas didn't get behind the rafters? Presently she asked briskly:

"Do you like craw-fishing?"

"Is that fishing in the creek?" said Isabel.

"No," said Jinks, with scorn; "it's only the blacks who catch things in the creek. I mean little lobsters—up in the paddock. I caught eight myself, and I lost the billy-canlid in the hole. I have a beautiful mud-hole close by the stock-yard. It's all mud. There's lots more muddy ones; and, if you like craw-fishing, I'll take you there. Mr. Wyatt, you persuade Aunt Gretta to come and catch lobsters in the paddock."

Wyatt, thus appealed to, turned to Gretta.

"I'm open to enlightenment, Miss Reay. Catching lobsters in the paddock sounds a little mysterious. Your

notions of sport at Doondi strike me as being rather elementary. Sib took me out shooting the other morning; we stalked the creek and discharged two barrels at an inoffensive row of ducks sitting upon a log. Then we came home again. We eat the ducks. Are we to eat the lobsters?"

"They're for Maafu," put in Jinks; "and Barty and I have supper with him."

"Let us go," said Gretta, jumping out of the hammock and tying on her hat.

They sallied forth—the boys, in the absence of their tutor, cracking the most inane jokes. Alas! Hester and Durnford had agreed to meet in their cave—Jinks, in huge excitement, carrying a tin billy and some other utensils borrowed from the kitchen, the rest armed with short sticks, a ball of string, and some pieces of raw beef.

Near the stock-yard there lay a chain of muddy pools, not one deep enough to drown a kitten, but famous for the size and quality of the lobsters which lived in them.

Gretta gravely directed operations, appointing to each a station. Isabel and Wyatt face to face, with half a yard of mud between them, each holding a stick from which hung a string with a piece of meat tied on to it; Jinks established in her own preserve, and the boys wading in the slime, with colanders ready to place under the prey. For the art of craw-fishing consists in sitting still with your string suspended over the mud till two green claws stretch up and fasten on the bait. Then, with a sudden jerk, you draw up something like a small craw-fish, under which you adroitly place a colander, or, with a swing backward of the string, to which the creature clings like grim death, you land your prize upon the grass behind you.

The lobster is greedy and stupid, and no amount of noise scares him from the bait. Jinks's shrieks rang out freely.

"Oh, Uncle Joe! I've got one. He's a beauty. Here! Oh, my word! Hold the billy. Quick!"

Gretta dexterously landed one after another, laughing at Mr. Wyatt's clumsiness, and Isabel entered into the sport with the zest of a child, amused at the funniness of the whole proceeding, and the comical appearance they presented. A distant roar of cattle and cracking of whips came nearer and nearer. Jinks put down her stick with a sigh of intense satisfaction, and ejaculated,

"Oh, I wish Pat was here! He does so love craw-fishing."

Then, in the next breath,

"Oh, that's him, riding alongside of the buggy; and there's Aunt Judith and Mr. Ferguson."

Craw-fishing was abandoned, and they all walked forward to meet the party from Gundalunda.

Mrs. Blaize, with her comely face, her blonde curls, and deep, mushroom hat, seemed to Isabel like an old friend. She got down with alacrity from the buggy and enfolded, first the English girl and then her nieces, in a motherly embrace.

"And now, I must see to my old man," she said, "for he has just been ailing ever since you left us, Isabel, and needs a deal of coddling."

Mr. Blaize, protected by his green umbrella, and a deep calico frill round his broad-brimmed hat, looked frailer and more wizened than ever. When he alighted upon the ground he shook himself much as a bird might have done, and cast a wistful glance at Gretta, and smiled pathetically at Isabel. He shuddered when Mr. Reay came up, with his legs swinging like a pair of compasses, linked the old man under his arm, and led him down toward the house. Poor Mr. Blaize kept pace for a minute, and then stopped, bleating,

"I dare say now Miss Gauntlet will give me an arm, Mr. Reay, for I'm a little slow for you—and"—with the upward alert look—"I always think myself that the sun is very hot in December; and a journey is a tiring thing."

Meanwhile, Pat Desmond, after having, so to speak, put himself at the ladies' feet, snatched up Jinks, and galloped back to the hill beyond the stock-yard, where a mounted white man and several blacks guarded a mob of tired-looking cattle.

The man's face was turned toward Doondi House. His features were undistinguishable, but Isabel recognized the easy carriage of head and shoulders which suggested so unmistakably the English gentleman, and the short brown beard and heavy mustache. She knew that it was Brad-dick the miner.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE NEW DROVER.

AT dusk, Isabel and Gretta, gathering breast-knots in the court-yard, saw Braddick approaching from the stock-yard.

He had put a coat on over his rough stockman's clothes. He carried his stock-whip and a bundle of ration-bags. His eyes were lowered till he neared the palisade, and then he kept them steadily averted from the young girls.

The store-door was open, and Mr. Reay stood near, at the end of the veranda. On the supposition that the newcomer was one of Desmond's hands in want of rations he called out—

“Well, my man: Have you got the cattle yarded? They seem a wildish lot.”

“We had a good deal of trouble with them, sir,” returned Braddick. “They broke several times.”

“They'll join the tailing mob to-morrow—that'll quiet them. And we shall slack work here till after Christmas. You'll want some plums and goodies I suppose. Ha!” as, during a more attentive scrutiny, something in Braddick's gait arrested him, “you are Mr. Desmond's mate, ain't you? From Wyeroo? Perhaps you were going to send in your name?”

Braddick laughed in an unmirthful sarcastic fashion. He was well aware of the Australian etiquette. If a traveler sends in his name to the master of the head-station it is presumed that he is to be treated as an equal. Should he fail to do so he has no right to complain at being sent to the huts.

“My name is Braddick,” he said, shortly; “I had not intended to send it in. Mr. Desmond engaged me to help in the muster here, and told me that I might perhaps get employment in the overlanding trip. I am, of course, anxious to accommodate myself to your arrangements. I meant to camp out. I have my tent, and came down for rations.”

Gretta started when he began to speak, and stood in a listening attitude.

"That man is a gentleman," said she, decidedly; "I know it by his voice. He is an Englishman, probably far better born and bred than we ourselves. Oh! many of them go by to and fro from the diggings and ask for work—Oxford and Cambridge men. It's quite melancholy to see the straits they are reduced to. I hope father won't make a mistake and send him to the kitchen."

She moved forward, drawing Isabel with her. Braddick looked toward them, first raised his hat, and then, meeting Isabel's eyes, made a second grave salutation.

The young girl bowed. Her heart had thrilled to the note of sad irony in his voice. A gentleman! Could there have been an instant of doubt? She felt almost angry with Mr. Reay for his obtuseness. Quick-darting sympathy, which a moment later seemed ridiculous, conveyed to her that Braddick felt his position keenly, and that her presence heightened the contrast between the "then" and the "now," and inflicted an additional stab of humiliation.

"Miss Gauntlett," exclaimed Mr. Reay, "you have met—Mr. Braddick?"

"Mr. Braddick saved—" began Isabel, and ended lamely—"did me a great service the day I went down the mine at Wyeroo."

She halted, from an indefinable feeling that any strong expression of gratitude would be out of place.

"How? What?" inquired Gretta, her curiosity on the alert. She had already contrived to intimate dumbly to her father that the stranger was to be invited to the house.

"Miss Gauntlett overrates a most trifling matter as far as I was concerned," said Braddick, coldly; "I merely pulled her away—very roughly, I fear—from a heap of falling stone. I can not find Mr. Desmond," he went on hurriedly. "I don't suppose there are any more directions about the cattle, and I had better make my camp."

"Desmond is at the Bachelors' Quarters," said Mr. Reay, pointing thither, "or more likely, just now, in the creek. You'll find a bunk over there, and dinner prepared, Mr. Braddick. I hope you'll accommodate yourself to your satisfaction, and give up the notion of camping. Squatting out of doors, with a Eura storm brewing, isn't an agreeable sort of proceeding—at least, I don't think so; and

you'll please to understand, Mr. Braddick, that my daughters will be glad to see you at the house, if you'll care to walk down, for some music by and by."

"I hope you'll come," interposed Gretta, with her little air of stately friendliness.

"Thank you," answered Braddick; "you are very kind. I had not intended," he began, in his tone of proud humility, and stopped. A curious expression stole over his face, and a far-away look into his eyes, as they turned toward the two girls, and dwelt lingeringly upon Isabel's Madonna-like face, upon her slim figure, and all the dainty adjuncts of her dress.

"Yes, I will come," he said, in quite a different manner; "I am much obliged to you for the invitation."

And without any further words he lifted his hat again and walked to the Bachelors' Quarters.

A storm was threatening. After dinner, for a short time, Gretta and Wyatt stood in the veranda, watching the lightning as it played over Comongin, while Ferguson found poor balm for his wounded spirit in conversing with Isabel; and Sebastian, who had ridden over for Christmas from the Selection, sat, as was his custom, among the knot of bushmen, every now and then putting a word into the talk about "Nash's mob," and straining his ears to catch Isabel's low-toned utterances.

Presently the storm burst, and the rain, beating in at the veranda, drove them to join the elders in the parlor. As they entered by the French window, the gentlemen from the Bachelors' Quarters came in from the back.

Pat Desmond, his jolly Irish face alight, his tongue in full swing, was in advance.

"Well, Mrs. Clephane, and how are you? And Miss Gretta? You see I couldn't keep away from you—not even long enough to smoke my pipe and have a yarn with Durnford. Are you getting over your shaking, Mr. Blaize? Sure, and they told me you'd gone to bed to draw your last breath; and I said, 'Anyhow, I'll be in for the wake.'"

"Pat," said Aunt Judith, with dignity, "if you're ever in need of any information about anything that's worth knowing, you can't do better than apply to my husband, for when he isn't snoozing he is reading, and when he isn't

reading he is meditating on what he has read. But, let me warn you, Mr. Blaize is not a man to stand your flippant jokes, and you'd do well not to trifle with his rest."

"My dear," murmured the white-haired little man, rousing himself from the depths of a squatter's chair, "don't check the young people. I always think myself that merriment in the young is a sign of health and happiness."

Pat sidled up to Gretta.

"Ah, this road is full of memories," he said, dropping his voice sentimentally. "Do you recollect the last time I rode back with you from Gundalunda, and had to leave you at the slip-rails, and gallop home in time for work at day-break? Yes, sir"—in a louder key—"I've turned my horses out; the upper paddock, isn't it?"

Braddick and Durnford made their greetings more quietly. The former had exchanged his rough garments for a dark suit, which showed signs of wear and of much creasing, but in which it was difficult to identify him with the working miner or the traveling drover. His manner was very quiet, a little stiff, but perfectly well-bred. One after the other, the sisters spoke to him with the kindly intention of setting him at ease, and, in surprise, changed their tone, discovering that he was perfectly self-possessed and evidently a man of culture, though the latter fact he seemed desirous of keeping in the background, for he hesitated and withdrew from a discussion which Clephane and Wyatt had started upon a mooted point in modern art, after having made a remark or two which betrayed a thorough acquaintance with the bearings of the subject.

It seemed an unnatural proceeding to spend a summer evening within doors at Doondi, and a little restraint hung over the party. Gretta was not herself. Ferguson noticed that her laughter sounded forced, and that she had fits of thoughtfulness not usual with her. Nor was she so ready in exchanging bantering remarks with Wyatt concerning his pupilage in bush-ways as had been the case a week ago. James, on his side, was spasmodic in his dashes at conversation; and his effort to behave as though nothing had happened was rather a failure.

Mr. Reay, Captain Clephane, and Sib sat down to a game of whist, at which the poet made a fourth. There was a call upon Isabel for a "tune" from Mr. Reay; and,

as she softly played the ballet music from "Romeo e Giulietta," Braddick left his place by a round table where he had been turning over a collection of English magazines, and took a seat beside the piano. He did not speak even when she had ended the movement and let her hands drop in her lap. The rain pattering on the roof, the low growling of thunder, and buzzing of insects, which rushed in thousands to the light, made a chorus in keeping with the muggy atmosphere and with the dreamy excitement which this man's presence aroused in her. She began again to play some disjointed chords, and started violently as a winged cockroach alighted on the music-stand. Braddick dexterously covered it with his handkerchief and took it to the window.

"There are two aspects to a tropical evening," he said, as he resumed his place. "When one reads of balmy breezes, waving palms, perennial greenery, and southern moonlight, one is apt to forget prickly heat, thunder-storms, mosquitoes, and such trifling discomforts."

"It would be easy to make a very big entomological collection in this room," said Isabel, with a nervous laugh; "I am fascinated by those uncanny flying ants which shuffle off their wings and leave them loose on the table-cloth. I feel like Alice in Wonderland," she added; "and I can hardly imagine that to-morrow will be Christmas-eve."

By a natural sequence their talk drifted to the various modes of celebrating Christmas, and Isabel, alluding to some ancient Devonshire customs, was astonished to find the miner primed with information concerning the county and its inhabitants.

"You know Devonshire well?" she exclaimed.

"South Devon? Yes. I was quartered at Plymouth for a year, and my home was—" he halted abruptly. "One gets to know the ins and outs of a county by making walking-tours and fishing in out-of-the-way villages. And you?" he asked, with a bright gleam of interest lighting his face, "is that where you live? There were Gauntletts in Suffolk, I remember," and he paused again.

"You mean my cousin—at Bretherton. That is in Suffolk. We were in London till my father died, and then I went to my sister at Heatherleigh. It is about fourteen miles from Plymouth."

"Your sister is Lady Hetherington? I recollect. Sir Richard was master of the hounds. Has he them still?"

"Oh, yes. He would be lost without the occupation."

There was a little silence. Isabel plunged into a waltz of Chopin's. She longed to ask him if he were acquainted with her brother-in-law, but something held her back. At last, going back upon the dreamy prelude, she said, abruptly,

"Mr. Braddick, it is very strange. The first time I saw you—in the mine—I felt sure you were—sure that you had come from England."

"Most of the men knocking about Wyeroo, who seek their fortune in my sort of irregular way, come from England, as Mr. Desmond will tell you. There's nothing strange about that."

"Perhaps not. But it is odd that you should know my country and my people. I dare say that you have met my sister and my brother-in-law."

"I have seen them," replied Braddick, shortly.

"Perhaps," continued Isabel, "we have other interests in common. Your friends may be mine. At least," she added simply, "I was not very intimate with any of our neighbors except those quite near, for I had not been long out of the school-room when I got ill. But it is most likely that my sister—"

"Not at all likely," interrupted Braddick; "I have no friends in England."

"Still, if you were quartered at Plymouth? The officers always visit a good deal at the country-houses round about."

"Why do you imagine that I must necessarily have been an officer?" he asked, coolly. "It is much more natural that you should think of me as a common soldier."

"No, that I am sure you were not," returned Isabel, with girlish frankness. "You couldn't honestly assure me that you were not—"

"A gentleman," he said, filling up the blank. "It is possible for a common soldier to be a gentleman, as well as a miner or drover, is it not? But we need not go into that question. I am flattered by your good opinion, Miss Gauntlet, but indeed I can honestly assure you that I feel more at home in the men's tent than in a lady's drawing-room. By the way, I am indebted to your recognition of me for my kind reception here."

"Oh, no," said Isabel, coloring; "Miss Reay was certain a mistake had been made."

"No one made a mistake. I dare say you have already learned something about Australian formalities. There are not many, but one at any rate is stringently observed. I never send in my name at a station. I have always preferred that it should be taken for granted I am a working-man. But for you and Miss Reay I should have been camping-out to-night, and my Christmas prospects would have seemed very different. I don't know that I have been wise."

"Not wise? Surely this is better than camping-out—on such a night?"

"Oh, yes! I grant you it is delightful—delightful to hear Chopin played in this way—delightful to see the dear old 'Blackwood' and 'Temple Bar,' and all the odds and ends, flowers and knickknacks; delightful to be received on terms of equality by ladies in evening dress, who suggest visions out of dream-land. Good heavens!" and he gave himself a little shake, "it is like a dream. But there's always something cold and depressing about the waking-up."

"I am sorry," said Isabel, gently, and their eyes met as she went on playing. His gaze lingered long after hers had drooped.

"How clever you are!" he said, "to play and listen and talk all at the same time."

"Oh!" she answered, dwelling upon an arpeggio chord, "this is my 'talking music,' I know it so well; and now it is over, and Mr. Wyatt is going to sing."

She got up, and Wyatt, under protest, took her place.

"This is the thing I meant, Miss Reay," he said, and struck a few lame chords, trolling forth with great spirit the opening bars of a German student's song.

"It's no use; I can't manage the accompaniment," he exclaimed, rising, "and Miss Gauntlett is helpless without the notes, which I haven't got."

"I'll play your accompaniment," said Braddick. "I used to know the song well—that is, if you like to try me. I haven't touched the piano for years."

Wyatt looked surprised, and bestowed an instant's careful scrutiny on the miner. Braddick sustained it without change of a muscle. A queer gleam of comprehension

shone in Wyatt's eyes. "The man's a real chap," was his unspoken thought.

"Thank you," he said, simply; "I am in luck. If you know that song you must know a great deal besides in the way of music. By Jove!" he ejaculated aside, as Braddick put his hands on the keys with the air of a master, and preluded with great power and delicacy, then took up the refrain and suppressed his own individuality, as a good accompanist is bound to do.

They were all delighted, and proffered eager congratulations. Captain Clephane cried "Bravo" from the whist-table, and speedily arrived at the same conclusion concerning the new hand as that which the others had already formed. The whist-party dispersed; grog and cake were brought in, and grapes and wine handed to the ladies. Song followed song, and then all the musical ones joined round the piano, and lifted their voices in a Christmas carol, at which the tears rushed to Mr. Blaize's eyes, and the old man nodded gently in time to the music. Hester and Durnford sat a little apart, and talked in low tones during the intervals and under cover of the piano. Every now and then, during a lull, voices here and there would sound distinctly. Gretta in soft dialogue with Wyatt; Mollie Clephane in domestic confabulation with Mrs. Blaize. "Jack says that Jinks is being ruined by Miss Barham. We put an advertisement in the paper and had twenty-five letters—people begging to come—but Jack says he couldn't be bothered with a new one; and Miss Barham cried, and so we shall keep her till her marriage," etc. And then, later, Aunt Judith, in tearful impressive tones, in her anxiety quite oblivious to the fact that Braddick was playing pianissimo—"Well, have you heard anything of Lance Murgatroyd since he got out? Look here, Mollie, I am just breaking my heart about it all. There's a report that he has turned bushranger; and to think of his being poor Hester's husband—"

"Aunt Judith," cried Gretta, wildly, "do you know that the drays haven't arrived yet, and we have nothing in the store for Christmas?"

Mr. Braddick had looked up from the piano in a quick wondering way at the mention of Lance Murgatroyd's name, first at Mrs. Blaize, and then at Hester, whose crimson face told of the pain and mortification she was enduring. He

brought his hands down with a big crash. There was a general move, and Mrs. Blaize, in remorse and confusion, began the good-nights.

CHAPTER XXV.

CHRISTMAS CAKES.

IT was the morning of the 24th of December, and the Doondi drays laden with stores from Leichardt's Town had not yet arrived. Groceries were at a low ebb on the station; the cognac had run out, there were wanting white sugar, candied peel, plums, and many other ingredients of the great Christmas cake and pudding, the annual triumph of Mrs. Blaize and Mollie Clephane. Alas! cake and pudding, as all good housewives are aware, should have been made a week ago, but the drays had been daily, almost hourly, expected, and Gretta—practical, energetic Gretta—had not been quite herself of late, and had failed to grapple promptly, as was her wont, with the emergency.

Oh, what a sweltering day it was! The rain of the night before rose in steam from the ground. The sun beat as it were through a wet blanket. Myriads of flies clung stickily to an empty sugar-mat set forth as a trap. The big kangaroo-hound, stretched in the shade of a vine, did not even bestir himself at Maafu's cry, "Hou! Hou! Fowl in de garden!" but only yapped lazily as if to say, "Just you wait till I get up," a warning which the chickabiddies did not mind in the least. A brisk little Willy-wagtail hopping about on the gravel seemed the only creature not overpowered by the heat. Work had been struck as far as the upper "hands" were concerned, and the "tailing mob" put in charge of a stockman and the black boys. Most of the party had gathered in the back veranda, Mollie at her sewing-machine, the baby sprawling at her feet; Isabel dressing a doll for Jinks; Sib crushing Indian corn; Ferguson, Clephane, Braddick, and Pat Desmond plaiting thongs of green hide, punching holes in saddle-straps, and tinkering saddlery; Wyatt assisting Gretta in the store to weigh out little bagfuls of tea and sugar, the Christmas bounty to the blacks. Jinks and the boys were consoling themselves over a huge water-melon; and Mrs. Blaize, standing by the open kitchen window, was ruefully con-

templating a basin of eggs, the accumulation of weeks, and ejaculating, disconsolately, "Such is life! Waiting! Waiting!" while Pat Desmond made the cheering suggestion that he and Braddick should ride over and forage at the nearest station.

But at that moment the cracking of stock-whips, and a volley of bullock-driver's oaths, borne faintly on the still air, told that the drays were approaching.

In a few minutes two heavily-laden wagons, drawn by oxen, were brought to a stand-still outside the palisade. Mr. Reay came out of his office, and in his disjointed fashion cut short an explanation on the part of the men, in which "Captain Rainbow," "that there darned strawberry bullock, which yokes and hobbles wouldn't keep close to a camp," and the "Gin Gin Crossing up to its banks," were prominent features.

"Come now," said the master, "that's all a pack of havers. Don't you talk to me of bushrangers on the Eura! You've been on the spree at the half-way public-house, and you've made a pretty close shave of Christmas. Talk of that by and by. A nobbler a-piece for you, and look sharp about unloading."

The rum was served out; the bullocks unyoked; the gentlemen ran out to assist in removing the tarpaulins, and soon the veranda was strewn with boxes and barrels, sacks of flour and mats of ration sugar. Gretta pounced upon the case of groceries which Desmond prized open; and then, with the air of a general reviewing a raw army, she addressed her recruits—

"Now, if you *care* about a proper Christmas dinner, you must all set to work, and help us to cook, or if you prefer it, we'll send to the blacks' camp and have some gins up to stone the raisins."

Groans and protests greeted this proposition.

"Sure, Miss Gretta," cried Pat, "av it's more than five able-bodied men can do to stone the raisins—not counting Mr. Blaize and Jinks—here's Mr. Gustavus to make a sixth."

The inspector of mines appeared at the kitchen door. He had just hung up his horse, and looked even yellower than usual, by reason of a pair of buff corduroys and a straw-colored alpaca coat which he wore with apparent

satisfaction. Joe irreverently began to sing under his breath,

“Dyspepsy would a-wooing go,”

while Mr. Gustavus made his bow to the ladies, explaining that having found Gundalunda deserted he had ridden over, relying upon the proverbial hospitality of Doondi, and Jinks artlessly inquired—

“Has your enemy made you sick lately, Mr. Gustavus?”

“Indeed, then, your enemy’s likely to get the best of you here,” observed Mrs. Blaize, grimly, as with a butcher’s knife she divided a lump of suet, and then in a stage aside murmured to Braddick, “It’s the coats of his stomach. Take my advice, Gustavus, and keep out of the kitchen.”

“The wise and active conquer difficulties
By daring to attempt them: sloth and folly
Shiver and shrink at sight of toil and hazard,”

gallantly spouted Mr. Gustavus. “Apportion to me my task, Miss Gretta. Command, I am thy servant.”

Presently, after a comprehensive gaze round, he stepped across to Durnford, who was leaning against a veranda-post, and whispered, with his hand to his ear—

“Who is that man talking to Miss Gauntlett?”

“His name is Braddick,” shortly replied the poet, who did not like Mr. Blaize.

“He has no business among the ladies,” said the inspector; “he has been working at the diggings.”

“So has Pat Desmond,” rejoined Durnford.

“Pat knows his position. That fellow is a gentleman and won’t acknowledge it. I have seen him at places on my rounds, and he was always with the men in the huts. This is the only station I know where he has given his name. There’s a mystery, believe me. But what puzzles me is that his face is connected, in my mind, with England, though I can’t recollect how or where I’ve seen it. A man of my vast social experience in both hemispheres, Durnford, finds a difficulty in tabulating his impressions. I shall make it my business to ransack my memory.”

“I have not the least doubt that Mr. Braddick’s private affairs will not long be a mystery to you,” said Durnford, pointedly.

“Mr. Gustavus,” cried Gretta, coming forward and presenting him with a meat-board and a chopper, “no idle

conversation allowed. Here's some suet for you to mince, and please be very careful to do it finely. Aunt Judith, you and Mollie take command, weigh and mix. Mr. Durnford and Miss Gauntlet, stone raisins. Hester, blanch almonds. Pat and Jinks, beat up butter, grease cake-tins, and wash currants. Mr. Wyatt, you take the whites of the eggs, and Mr. Braddick the yelks. Here's a whisk apiece for you, and I recommend you to sit in the veranda without your coats. And, Mr. Ferguson," she turned a little shyly to James, "perhaps you will help me to sift the flour and sugar?"

Never was a merrier morning spent. After a hurried luncheon there was a fresh adjournment to the kitchen, and by four o'clock the cakes were in the oven and the pudding shrouded for the pot. A bathe and a lounge had been well earned. At half-past five the scene shifted to the wide, shady veranda of the Bachelors' Quarters, where the thermometer was discovered to be only one hundred degrees, one degree lower than the reading at the big house.

Mr. Durnford, Joe, and Mark did the honors of the school-room, and handed tea and fruit to the ladies who were in hammocks outside. Sib dipped Isabel's pocket-handkerchief in the water-bag, sprinkled it with eau-de-Cologne, and, as she held it to her face, fanned her with a banana leaf. Wyatt performed the same office for Gretta. Pat Desmond and Jinks had climbed upon a rafter and were firing millet-grains at each other out of a pea-shooter, while Mr. Gustavus sprawled elegantly on the canvas stretcher and read in sonorous tones,

"They say the bush is dull are not so very far astray,
For this eucalyptic cloisterdom is anything but gay;
But its merciful dullness I contentedly could brook,
If I only could get back my lost lamented Chinee cook.

"We got fat upon his cooking, we were happy in those days,
For he tickled up our palates in a thousand pleasant ways;
Oh, his dinners! oh, his dinners! they were fit for any duke;
Oh, delectable Mongolian! oh, celestial Chinee cook!"

"Eucalyptic cloisterdom!" echoed Gretta. "That's a nice, expressive term—very applicable to life on the Eura. Sib, I declare there's a breeze springing up. Saddle the horses and let us ride to the Gorge. I want some ferns and

hoya for Christmas decorations. *Cohee!*" she cried, espying a black boy in the distance, and sending forth her sweet, fresh voice. The boy turned and ran at her call. "Drive in yarraman, Combo," said Gretta; "marra make haste. Altogether White Mary ride along a Gorge."

Within, Hester poured out tea, and composedly cut bread and butter; but she took no part in the conversation, answering absently when Braddick, who had installed himself at her side, asked her a question, and wondering dimly why he attached himself to her, and why he looked at her so often and in so perplexed a manner. She felt a dreamy pleasure in the thought that she was Durnford's guest, and her eyes noted with quickened interest the rough bush furniture, the books on their shelves, the dust, the canvas arm-chair—all the homely appliances of the bachelors' room over which love cast now such a strange glamour. This was where he had spent his long lonely evenings, where he had thought of her, where he had written out his heart's yearning, and where he had battled with his love, and had, for her sake, decided to leave her. She watched him as he moved about. He was so quiet, so gentle, so full of the refinement which she often fancied was lacking in her surroundings, and yet, withal, he was so manly. His sedulous care that no word or gesture on his part should draw toward her compromising remark moved her at once to gratitude and resentment. She felt, at the moment, a wild desire to rise and announce their relations toward each other; to brave misconstruction and conventionality, and claim the right to recognition of a noble love, which should be its own justification.

But no pure woman, even though she may have gone through an experimental marriage, is capable of loving with absolute self-consciousness. Her emotions are, to her, a source of wonder, tumult, and vacillation. Constitution and training render her unable to grasp the position. She is alternately the victim of impulse and reaction. She theorizes boldly upon the lawfulness of spiritual passion and its independence of material satisfaction, and thus may recklessly rush to the very brink of a precipice; but all the while she feels an underlying sense of moral guilt, and a terror of the human instincts which imperiously assert themselves after a certain critical point has been reached in her intercourse with the man whom she loves.

To this point Hester was hurrying. Each secret meeting with Durnford at the cave, each passionate glance of his which she intercepted, each question and doubt against which she struggled, brought her nearer to the moment in which she should realize her danger.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BY MOONLIGHT.

THE breeze had freshened into a keen wind, bringing the most delicious sense of coolness and exhilaration. There had evidently been severe storms in other parts of the district. The smoky haze had disappeared from the mountains; and the stifling heat no longer oppressed like a leaden pall.

It was almost dusk when the little band passed through the slip-rails, Pat Desmond and the boys ahead, making the bush ring with a jolly Irish chorus, in which now and then Gretta, Wyatt, and one or two of the others joined; the horses stepping briskly, tossing their manes and coquettishly curveting as though they had caught the spirit of their riders. All were merry; there was a fire of would-be clever sayings, and the feeblest witticisms were greeted with peals of laughter.

They paused for a minute in the bed of the creek; the horses plashed with their hoofs and champed their curbs in the running water, which made music as it rushed over the stones. A moon near her full shed broken beams through the chestnut-trees from which the long pods hung like misshapen fruit; the thirsty arums sucked in the moisture, erect, unsheathing their golden hearts; and the prickly yellow cactus lining the banks shed its musky fragrance upon the air.

Howling and sounds of woe proceeded from the blacks' camp opposite. The riders halted at a few yards' distance, and Sib and Wyatt dismounted to investigate matters. It was a picturesque scene—the fires leaping up and illuminating the green little gunyas, the groups of swarthy figures, and the imp-like pickaninnies, who rushed to and fro, and peered at the white men from behind the gum-trees. In front of an outside gunya, whence the wailing sounded, three

or four indignant gins vociferated round an angry warrior, who tragically flourished a nulla-nulla, and muttered aboriginal oaths; while King Comongin, enthroned upon a possum-skin, blear-eyed, white-haired, and nude to the waist, his tattooed chest and brass plate—the insignia of royalty—showing in the glow, sat, philosophically callous to the disturbance, playing at cards with three other dusky elders for a miscellaneous stake, to which each had contributed a bit of tobacco, a half-cooked bone, a piece of sugar-bag, and the rusty blade of an old knife.

“So much for the romance of the camp, Miss Reay,” said Wyatt. “Pompo my hero has been banging his bride about the head with a waddy. Remorse has overtaken him; he believes that an avenging debbil debbil is going to punish him for his breaking of the law, and this had led to a misunderstanding. You see in this case conjugal felicity did not last long.”

Gretta rebuked the delinquent in the odd dialect which prevails between white and black, and which Wyatt and Ferguson both thought sounded so quaint from her pretty lips. Mrs. Pompo came forth from the gunyas at the sound of Gretta’s voice—a melancholy object, with her nose bleeding and her forehead cut.

“Baal that fellow budgery, Benjamin,” cried she, pointing to Pompo; “missus, you tell that fellow him no good—too much mumkull—too much saucy.”

Whereupon Pompo broke in,

“Sar, I b’lieve debbil debbil cobbon coolla belonging to me. What for mine mine run away with that fellow gin? Baal mine pidney. I b’lieve debbil debbil marra Pompo. Mine close-up bong.”

At this tragic suggestion there was a universal howl, and King Comongin, who had till now preserved a dignified silence, opined gravely that Massa Reay was a budgery medicine man.

“Suppose massa pialla debbil debbil, that fellow baal coolla belonging to Pompo.”

Then Gretta promised solemnly, in her father’s name, that the “debbil debbil” should be “pialla’d” that very night, and delivered an harangue upon the duties of married life. Peace was restored between the bride and bridegroom, and all the members of the camp were invited to the station on the evening of the morrow, when it was

promised they should receive the Christmas bounty of rations and "toombacco."

On cantered the young people, in wilder frolic than before. But gradually, as the hills closed on the creek, and the track obliged them to ride by twos, the noise subsided into duets, and the Irish chorus pealed back faintly only now and then when the cliffs no longer interposed between the leaders and their followers. They came to a ghostly-looking flat, with hills rising like an amphitheater before them, and tall, dead gums, keeping guard like sentinels at the entrance to the gorge. The moon cast strange shadows and etherealized the girls' faces as they shook their horses' reins and darted forward in a stretching canter.

"Mind the paddy-melon holes!" shouted Sib, seizing Isabel's bridle for an instant, and turning her horse's head so that he and she rode abreast. At the sentinel gums they dismounted, and leaving their horses in the charge of Ferguson, who had volunteered the service, entered the mysterious cleft where rocks, tapestried with *hoya* and mountain-creepers, rose high on either side, and a clear little stream flowed along a bed of rock, smooth as the paved aisle of a church.

The forms vanished between the jaws of the ravine, but the voices echoed back Gretta's pearly tones, Isabel's gentle laughter, Wyatt's refined English intonation, and Mr. Gustavus's bass. Ferguson laid his head against the mane of Gretta's mare *Brunette*, and stroked the animal's hide and sought sympathy in the beast's great, pitiful eyes. His heart was sick and sore.

"It's all up with me," he murmured; "she's getting to care for Bertram, and I've no chance now. Damn him!" he exclaimed, but the imprecation was sorrowful rather than angry, and it was with a sort of shock that James pulled himself up. "She's too good to be a man's second-best. That's what I mean," he said, under his breath. "But if he loves her—God bless her! Nothing matters provided she is happy."

It seemed a long time before the explorers came back. Ferguson sat with his back against a boulder, and as he held the horses' bridles, and mechanically loosened and tightened the reins, so that *Brunette* might snap at a young twig, or another stoop to a rill of water, his misery seemed to quicken his insight, and to bring him into wider sympathy with

his fellows, so that he could dimly imagine what was passing in the hearts of those who had left him, and wondered how many key-notes had been struck that night which should determine the harmonies or discords of their future lives.

When they returned, the men's arms were filled with withes of *hoya* and red *kennedia*, tufts of parasite lilies, Australian mistletoe, and sheaves of fern; and they brought with them the scent of wild *jasmine* and of many rock-flowers. Braddick was not laden like the rest, but he held in his hand a little cluster of *jasmine* which had dropped from Isabel's breast. He lifted her to the saddle, and they cantered side by side across the flat. It was a weird ride. The bitterns shrieked, and night-birds sent forth wailing cries of "Maw-pawk—Maw-pawk." And now again they were in the shadow of the hills, crossing and recrossing the flagged creek-bed, and riding beside still dark pools, into which dead logs dipped like uncanny reptiles. Suddenly the moon became obscured by a driving cloud, and a fantastic tremor seized Isabel, so that she shivered.

Braddick paused in his talk. It was of music. Strange! When this subject was touched upon by her he seemed to cast aside a restraint which at other times girded him, and spoke with that melancholy enthusiasm that seemed aroused by the thought of past experience, in which acute joy and acute pain were blended. A subtle sympathy made Isabel aware that such memories of his were connected with music, and that she had unconsciously touched a spring which set them vibrating.

"You are cold?" he asked.

"Oh, no! On such a dry delicious night? I was only thinking how different this ride is from anything I ever did at Heatherleigh, and a fancy struck me—it often does—I wonder if you ever feel the same—that this is like a vivid dream."

Braddick gave his shoulders a queer little shake, and said, with his face turned from her—

"Life has seemed to me all a dream since I left England—sometimes a very unpleasant nightmare—and I have wished that it would change into a deep sleep, from which I might never awake."

"Oh!" uttered Isabel, shrinking as if pained; and look-

ing round he saw that her eyes were resting upon him with wistful interest.

“ You mustn’t waste sympathy on me,” he said, in a grave voice, which had in it no lightness or mockery; “ it is true that I have felt the wish to end everything, but that is a cowardly and contemptible sort of sentiment. Life is a noble thing in itself; I didn’t think so a little while ago, but I am gradually getting to the belief. At any rate, it has to be lived out, *tant bien que mal*; and the Eastern sage was right when he said, ‘ Death is a thing desirable when it comes, but not to be desired.’ ”

“ I once felt in that way,” said Isabel, softly. “ It was when I had been very ill, and was so weak that to slip away from earth seemed easiest and best. I think it is a feeling which comes after sickness or great sorrow.”

“ And now?” he asked, ignoring the latter part of her sentence. “ You have got over it? You are strong and happy? If there is any one in the world who ought to be purely, serenely happy, it is you.”

“ Why?” she asked, innocently.

“ I suppose it is certain that the highest joy comes from the consciousness of being able to do good to others,” he answered, slowly. “ You have the power of making those around you happy.”

“ I am glad that you think this of me,” she replied, simply. “ I have never had much chance of helping people in my life. Every one has had somebody else. No one has seemed to want anything I could do.”

“ Well,” he said, abruptly, “ it may perhaps be a pleasure to you to know that you have done me good, even in this short time. If you care to hear in what way, I will tell you before I leave Doondi.”

“ You are going to the northern station?”

“ Yes. This morning Mr. Reay offered me a post there, and I accepted it gladly. I’m to have charge of one of the outside sheep-stations, at what seems to me a liberal salary. I believe there is a difficulty in getting a man for the place. It’s about the last in the explored district, and the blacks are troublesome. I am very glad of the opening; and I shall be able in time I hope to take up a block of country, and when I have saved a little money to make a start for myself.”

He spoke quietly and hopefully, without any trace of bitterness. Isabel's thoughts reverted to his previous words.

"But," she said, timidly, "the Australian life is not a nightmare to all. They seem very cheerful and contented here—my uncle, for instance, who was a soldier like you, and enjoyed society and that sort of thing in England. And surely, many are fortunate—"

"On the other hand, there are many failures. I accept your rebuke, Miss Gauntlett. It is my own fault that things have gone persistently wrong with me from my youth upward. I don't regret English society—and 'that sort of thing'; nor do I object to hard work. Under some circumstances one feels a savage pleasure in physical suffering."

"Oh!" said Isabel, shrinking again. "One must have been very unhappy for that."

"You can't imagine it! What English girl could, whose life has been a bed of rose-leaves? But it's true. I had a devil-may-care sort of sensation when I landed in Leichardt's Town, with a capital of fifty pounds and a land-order."

Isabel laughed sadly.

"I have been told that Mr. Reay had only the land-order."

"Of course I ought to have turned my pittance into a fortune," said Braddick. "According to all colonial traditions I should have hit upon a rich claim or the site of a future township. But I did neither of these things. The money dribbled away. I found myself on the roads, 'humping my swag,' and breaking stones or splitting slabs for my grub."

"But your friends in England!" said Isabel. "They would have helped you."

"I had cut myself off from my friends," replied Braddick. "Oh, I wasn't to be pitied—I wanted to break away from old associations. It was then I determined to sink 'the gentleman,' and you can little imagine the wild sort of life I have been leading for the last six or seven years, now driving cattle—now on the diggings—now shepherding with a Chinaman, hobnobbing with a black trooper, or even with a bushranger. You see what promotion this start with Mr. Reay is to me. Fortune began to smile upon me the day I first saw you. At all events I have to thank

you for the happiest day I have known for years. They are cantering on. Hadn't we better join them?"

In a few minutes the crossing was reached, and that strange night-ride was nearly at an end. The blacks' camp was peaceful now; the fires burned low, and swarthy forms, wrapped in tattered blankets, lay round the embers. Again the riders halted in the river-bed. The moon shone down upon happy faces, and the poetry of the night set several hearts quivering with delicious agitation. All were sorry that the excursion was over, except indeed Ferguson, in his lonely misery; Sebastian, conscious of a trouble stirring his placid nature; and Mr. Gustavus devoured by bilious jealousy and suspicion. Gretta and Bertram Wyatt drew up at a little belt of scrub on the bank, and raised themselves in their stirrups to gather some clusters of the blossoms of a native shrub. A shower of sweetness rained upon them. They were bathed in perfume. As they rode on he said:

"England can not give us anything better than this, Miss Reay. I shall remember this Christmas-eve as long as I live."

No light, jesting reply rose to Gretta's lips. She could never answer him jestingly now. It occurred to her, at this moment, to wonder whether he had noticed how all her little mocking ways and frivolous talk failed her in his presence. She herself had never before recognized the fact so thoroughly. It frightened her. She knew that a great change had come to her during the past two weeks, but she did not yet understand its full meaning, and, with a thrill of mingled excitement and terror, shrunk from the revelation. She felt no longer mistress of herself, and instinctively longed for a word or look which should restore her sense of supremacy. She checked her horse.

"I want to speak to Mr. Ferguson," she said, and waited till he had gained her side. Wyatt drew into the rear, but Gretta and James kept pace in silence. The same thought was in both their minds, but neither could give it expression. He in bitterness, and she in vague wonder and alarm, realized vividly how wide was the gulf which lay between this night and that other night, so short a time ago, when Gretta's impulses had so nearly answered to his call. They were on the edge of the lagoon now, and the lights of the house shone on the hill above them. Mr. Reay, Mollie,

and Clephane, in the veranda, sent down a welcoming cooee, and, in reply, one of the party began to sing the old, old Christmas carol, in which all the voices joined, near and distant, till it swelled into a joyful pæan,

“ ‘ God bless you, merry gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born on Christmas-day.’ ”

CHAPTER XXVII.

KING COMONGIN EXILED.

CHRISTMAS-DAY this year fell upon a Sunday, which, at Doondi, was also mail-day.

At eleven o'clock, all on the head-station, family and guests, stockmen, fencers, Kanakas and half a dozen black boys—a few of the more respectably clad gins and stray lubras from the camp looking on from outside the courtyard—congregated in the broad, shady back veranda. It was a curious little assemblage, the two pretty girls in their bright-colored muslins and fluttering ribbons; Hester, all in white, pale and dreamy; matronly Mollie; beaming Mrs. Blaize, in her best black silk and a white muslin Garibaldi; the handsome Englishmen and stalwart bush youths; and the heterogeneous company of “hands”—the stockmen wearing moleskins which gave evidence of having been washed in the creek; Maafu, the most civilized of Kanakas, in an ancient suit of Sib's, his tow-colored hair well-greased, and a rose in his button-hole; Combo, the delighted wearer of a dilapidated jockey-jacket, violet-silk and primrose sash—the Doondi colors; and the other black boys in store trousers and blue shirts, with crimson handkerchiefs binding their waists and woolly heads, the bright color contrasting with their ebony skins, bead-like eyes, and glistening teeth.

The black boys seated themselves on the edge of the veranda, with difficulty repressing their impish merriment; Maafu and his compatriots, grave and decorous, drew apart from the blacks, and produced their Church Services; the rest occupied chairs and benches; and Mr. Reay, standing before an extemporized lectern, read aloud the appropriate

psalms and collects. They said a prayer; and afterward, all standing up, and Gretta leading, sung:

“Come all ye faithful.”

Then there was a general shaking of hands, a distribution of neat little packets, a great many “Merry Christmas’s and Happy New-year’s;” and the “station hands” went back to their huts to enjoy themselves.

Mrs. Blaize, however, who sought to redeem the errors of what she, good soul! considered a frivolous life, and with a view to atonement for her husband’s infidelity, detained the blacks; and, as was her wont on Sundays at Gundalunda, gave them instruction in the doctrines of Christianity. Jinks stood by, nodding approval, and every now and then putting in a word of explanation, while Mrs. Blaize, her ringlets quivering, her face full of earnestness and solemnity, translated “Peep of Day” into a comical dialect suited to the aboriginal comprehension.

She was relating the history of the Fall, and describing the interview between Eve and Satan in the garden of Eden. A spry little nigger, Euroka by name, fresh from the Tiery-boo tribe, listened in wonderment, evidently puzzled to adjust the tale to certain obvious facts of life which presented themselves to him on the Eura.

“Great spirit Yoolootanah say to Adam, ‘Baal you eat that fellow fruit. Suppose you eat him, corbon mine coola belonging to you.’ Then debbil debbil pialla Eve, ‘Budgery this fellow fruit—like it—like it.’” Mrs. Blaize paused, at a loss for an illustration that should commend itself to Kanaka’s gastronomical experience, in which the conventional apple had no place.

“Like it bunya,” suggested Jinks.

“Yohi,” said Euroka, deeply interested.

“Debbil debbil climb along a tree,” continued Mrs. Blaize, exhibiting a picture which represented Eve draped in her hair, familiarly conversing with a boa-constrictor, the reptile entwining the stem of a palm from which a cluster of very large apples hung, in defiance of botanical laws.

“Baal that bunya,” cried Euroka, aggrieved. “What for snake?”

“You pidney,” explained Mrs. Blaize; “debbil debbil

been make him like it big fellow snake. Debbil debbil plenty pialla Eve—”

“ Baal, missus,” interrupted Euroka, derisively, his countenance expanding in a grin; “ baal snake talkee talkee?”

Mrs. Blaize, a little nonplused, referred to Genesis, and told how the great spirit Yoolootanah had informed Moses of the circumstance. But Euroka steadfastly refused to accept the statement which his own knowledge of natural history flatly contradicted, and, shaking his head gravely, declared:

“ Mine think it two fellow woolla. Two fellow tell a lie.”

The controversy grew warm. Jinks was properly orthodox in the matter of the Fall, the Flood, and so forth, and severely rebuked Euroka’s skepticism.

“ The great spirit Yoolootanah—that’s God, you know—can do anything, Euroka. He can make snakes talk. He always does what is right, and punishes people when they deserve it—doesn’t he, Aunt Judith?”

But at that moment certain theological difficulties of her own entered Jinks’s mind, and it struck her that this was an opportunity to air them.

“ Aunt Judith,” said she, putting her thumbs together and assuming her imp-like expression of demureness, “ I don’t think it was quite right of God to punish the Jews for killing Jesus. He always meant them to do it, you know. Jesus had to come down from heaven and die for men. God *promised* Adam; and some one had to kill Him. If the Jews hadn’t done it nobody would have been saved.”

“ Dear heart!” murmured Mrs. Blaize, laying down her book, “ it’s as bad as arguing with my old man.”

And just then, to her relief, a diversion occurred. There was a cry from the opposite veranda of—

“ The mail, the mail! Hullo, Stone, a merry Christmas to you!” and a red-faced, red-whiskered, excitable-looking little man, on horseback, leading a pack-horse, clattered up and dismounted at the veranda-railings.

The postman, talking volubly all the time, unstrapped three brown leather mail-bags from his bundle, and handed them respectively to Mr. Reay, Ferguson, and Clephane; the former in his turn produced a bottle of brandy, and poured some into a glass which Stone filled from the water-cask.

“ Merry Christmas, Stone.”

“ Beg pardon, sir, no offense, sir, the same to you and your cattle. And I can tell you of a bullock that’s out of your mob, cap’en. I goes round the Gin Gin ridge, and I sees my noble Mr. Billy with the Tieryboo brand on the near shoulder, and I drives him close up to Gundalunda, and I says nothing at all, and just puts him inside the boundary fence.”

“ Any news, Stone?” asked Mr. Reay, leisurely cutting the string of the mail-bag.

“ News! The colony is all agog. Gin Gin crossing is up, and so is the gully agin the boundary. An inch here makes a deal of difference there. The ministry is out, and Catesby is forming another.”

“ No!” ejaculated Mr. Reay, and Gretta whispered to Ferguson—

“ He’ll put in for Works, and I shall have a little of Leichardt’s Town gayety this winter.”

“ The new governor has stepped into a constitutional crisis,” continued Stone. “ He’s a peppery old chap, and has brought a lot of Chinese servants; there’s no missus, but there’s a young lady, and lor, I never see’d her like except at Doondi.” Stone politely raised his hat to Gretta, and stared at Isabel. “ I says to my old woman, there’s a beauty for you and no mistake. There’s been a reception, and the guns banging, and all the volunteers turned out, and a levee— Good day to you, sir. Any message for Teryboo, cap’en? I shall be there to-night.”

Mrs. Clephane delivered some instructions relating to domestic matters, while Mr. Reay turned over a couple of official-looking documents addressed to himself, and then sorted the contents of the mail-bag. There were a great many papers, some English magazines, which he tossed over to Hester, and a bundle of letters.

“ Here’s a packet of Leichardt’s Town clavers for you, Gretta; and Miss Gauntlett, two, three, four English big ‘uns.”

“ There won’t be so many after a mail or two,” said Desmond in a melancholy tone. “ Sure, and it’s thirty-two blood relations I’ve got over in the old counthry, and not a line from one of them, barring my mother.”

“ That’s from the meat-preserving place, Sib, I’d bet,” continued Mr. Reay; “ I thought they’d be after a mob.

Here, Durnford, two for you. This looks like a lawyer's fist. Winch and Hellyar. Their office-mark isn't a nice sight for sore eyes—at least, I don't think so."

"I hope you haven't been getting into the clutches of the law, Mr. Durnford," said Gretta.

Durnford had taken the letter, and was opening it apparently with some anxiety. He uttered a faint ejaculation as he read, then laughed in a rather odd way to himself, and folded up the document, and transferred it to his pocket.

"No, Miss Reay," he said. "Poor men don't need lawyers, but Winch and Hellyar are a sort of standing address which I give, and I occasionally get a communication through them."

He moved away, and presently left the veranda and crossed over to his own quarters.

"Queer fish, Durnford," murmured Clephane. "Let's hear the home news, Isabel," and the uncle and niece put their heads together over Lady Hetherington's epistle, which somehow smote Isabel with a chill: it was so stiff and uns spontaneous.

Meanwhile, Ryan had been watering his pack-horse, but now turned to remark:

"There's a bit of news you won't get in the mail, Mr. Reay. Captain Rainbow, as he calls himself, has stuck up a digger on the road to Moonbags, and taken his haul. The constables are after him, but they say he is in hiding at the head of the Eura up among the gorges, and they ain't likely to get at him there. You'll be having him bailing you up here, sir."

"No fear of that," returned Mr. Reay. "No such luck! I'd soon make short work of him. What is it, Braddick? You are not funking the bushrangers, are you?"

Braddick had moved forward with an involuntary exclamation. He checked himself, and said quietly, "I happen to have seen Rainbow once, that's all. I was bushed one night, a few months ago, up in the Blue Mountain district, and came by accident upon his camp. I'll tell you about it another time."

"After we have read our letters," said Gretta. "I mustn't talk of eucalyptic cloisterdom again. This is quite romantic and Geoffrey Hamlynish. Perhaps he wears armor like Ned Kelly."

"That Kelly business was a mistake," jerked out Mr. Reay; "too much romance and sensationalism altogether! Every twopenny-halfpenny ruffian who takes to the bush apes Ned Kelly. I'd hang 'em all if I could. I'd stamp bushranging out of Australia. Girls, there's a letter from Catesby. I must start for Leichardt's Town to-morrow. They've offered me 'Works;' and Dawkes is going to bring forward another Railway Bill."

Some jubilation followed. Mr. Reay was like a war-horse, which scented the battle from afar. But he eyed doubtfully another long blue envelope, and seemed in perturbation of spirit.

"The papers about Karslake's murder are in this," he said; "it's from Hill of the police. If Comongin is guilty they'll want me to give him up. I shall not do that, for he has been a faithful friend to me for many a year; but I must turn him off Doondi. Now I shall not open these papers till after the blacks have had their spree to-night, and then we must have our reckoning—Comongin and I."

Mr. Reay turned away, and went into his office, taking the papers with him.

"What is the story?" asked Bertram Wyatt, looking round.

"Why," said Clephane, "I've long suspected that my father-in-law was harboring a criminal, but he never would entertain the idea till, as I suppose is the case now, the truth forced itself upon him. I am only surprised that he does not immediately give Comongin up to the police. It would be quite in keeping with his character, wouldn't it, Mollie? But I imagine that, with his stern sense of justice, he feels that there are some arguments on the black's side. The story is this—Karslake was a government surveyor, employed in old days to mark out the boundary of the Eura. The blacks sneaked the camp, and murdered the whole party, except two men, who hid themselves, and after a bit managed to get down to Leichardt's Town. Some of the blacks were caught and punished; but the ring-leader, whom I imagine to have been Comongin, escaped."

"And Mr. Reay," inquired Wyatt, "how was he concerned in the affair?"

"Oh!" explained Clephane, "he took up land on the Eura a little while afterward, picked up Comongin, a young

native then, and his gin, who slept at the door of his hut, looked after him, and, for eight months, kept the blacks from spearing him and his cattle. That was before your father went to Victoria, wasn't it, Sib?"

Sib nodded.

"When he came back here ten years ago," continued Clephane, "Comongin, a veteran, promoted to royalty, turned up again, a most rare instance of loyalty among the blacks. Poor old Comongin! He has kept many a spear from being hurled at the Doondi and Tieryboo cattle, and I am sorry the authorities have raked up the matter again. I have no doubt that things stand pretty equal, and that Karslake and his men had potted niggers in their time."

The little *fête* Gretta had planned took place on a flat not far from the stock-yard and the lobster-holes. It had once been a sheep-station, and was covered with the short couch-grass, and upon it there stood a dilapidated building which had been used as a wool-shed.

Hither, after dinner, the whole party betook themselves. All the blacks from the camp were assembled, Comongin at the head of his tribe, a conspicuous personage with his white hair, a red blanket majestically draping his half-clad figure, and his brass plate reflecting the gleam of a huge bonfire they had kindled.

The wool-shed was decorated with green bows and creepers from the scrub. A trapeze had been erected, and two fencers in jerseys commenced proceedings by an acrobatic performance to an accompaniment of slow music from a concertina and a Jew's harp, played by a Doondi stockman and the celebrated Red Dick from Gundalunda. Bertram Wyatt sung a rollicking song, and Pat Desmond, with a good deal of buffoonery and a strong brogue, recited a scene from "Handy Andy."

The blacks, however, did not much relish this part of the programme; and now came the feature of the festivity —Gretta's surprise.

The shed was darkened and the natives mustered round a long deal table, upon which stood two shallow earth-pans filled with raisins and brandy, Pat Desmond and Sib presiding at one end, Captain Clephane and Braddick at the other; the ladies mounted on a sort of raised platform,

which had been the shearing-floor, and which commanded a full view of all that was going on.

The blacks pressed round the table, twenty or thirty pairs of eyes peering eagerly into the dishes, while a confused jabber filled the room. Suddenly, the last light was extinguished, and a match put to the brandy. The blue and red flames leaped up, flickered, and blazed again, shedding Rembrandtesque gleams and shadows. They played upon the slab walls, the dark rafters, the tattooed breasts of the savages, and the ebony faces, now alive with expectation and now with alarm and awe, which changed presently to the most farcical amusement.

At first, a yell rang through the shed, then shrieks of "debbil! debbil!" and there was a pell-mell retreat on the part of the natives from the table. When, however, the white men were seen to dip their hands into the snapdragon, the savages rushed forward again; swarthy arms protruded, and shouts of laughter re-echoed, as black hands were withdrawn filled with plums and sheathed in fire.

They danced, they screamed, they rubbed their fingers on their bodies, and shook them wildly in the air, while flashes of blue flame flew hither and thither; then, cramming the plums into their mouths, again essayed the fiery ordeal.

By and by salt was thrown into the pans. The white men's faces assumed a deathly hue, and the illumination became ghastly and hellish. This was the culminating point. Black boys and gins clung frantically to each other, and retreated and advanced, yelling anew in mingled terror and delight. Now, the burning spirit was extinguished, and the lanterns relit.

As soon as the laughter had subsided the blacks made a circle round the bonfire on the flat. The gins, in the outer ring, clapped their hands and chanted monotonously to the music of tumtums and rude wind instruments. The elder men beat their nulla-nullas and waved their spears; while Pompo and two or three companion braves—their upper clothing cast off, fantastic patterns painted in white and yellow upon their bare chests and backs—stepped into the arena and executed a grotesque dance, in which, with a wild war-whoop, the advancing chorus joined at intervals.

It was the weirdest spectacle Isabel had ever beheld. The moonlight blended curiously with the glow of the burning

logs, and the rhythmic movement of the half-naked forms, the swaying of barbaric weapons, the unearthly music, combined, perhaps, with the magnetic influence which Braddick's voice and presence exercised upon her, wrought upon her imagination, so that, for the moment, it was difficult to realize that she was not feeling and acting in a dream.

The corroboree was over all too soon, and the blacks dismissed to their camps, but, as they were turning away, after a general good-night had been said, Mr. Reay, who had been grave and silent during the evening, came out of the wool-shed, and in stern accents, called upon Comongin to remain. The old king lowered his spear and the nulla-nulla he was carrying on his shoulder, and stood forth, with the fire-light upon him, a squalid tragi-comic, and yet not altogether unheroic, representative of aboriginal monarchy. The black's intuition is keen, and something in Mr. Reay's tone warned him that his hour was come.

"Comongin," said the squatter, "what for you tell me that baal you been mumkull Karslake? That carbon long time; but baal mine forget. I believe you plenty woolla."

Then Mr. Reay proceeded to explain that the "Great White Mary along a big fellow water"—in other words, the queen—had discovered, beyond doubt, that Comongin had been concerned in the murder of her brother Karslake, and had sent her orders, through her servants the white chiefs in Leichardt's Town, requiring that he, Mr. Reay, should give up Comongin to be shot.

"Baal mine shoot you, Comongin," he continued, "because long time you budgery brother belonging to me, but suppose you nangry along a Doondi, big White Mary carbon coolla with me."

Then sentence was delivered. Comongin was deprived of the rights of brotherhood from henceforth. Never more should he set foot within the boundaries of Doondi, Tiery-boo, or Gundalunda. Never more should he receive rations or tobacco at the hands of those present. Comongin was excommunicated, and bidden to "yan" forever.

The old king uttered one long dismal howl, which was caught up by the tribe behind till the bush resounded with cries of woe. Mrs. Blaize put in a sobbing protest.

"Dear heart, Duncan, and is this what ye call peace and good will? Let him be—just for my sake! He's a black,

and I'm just soft about blacks. They're an awful unregenerate set; but don't I know what it is to be an unprofitable servant? Let him stop."

"Judith, be silent; he must be sent away."

"Then I'll just go back to my own old man and try to convince him of the error of his own thoughts, and be you thankful, Isabel, that you've got nothing to do with men—though you will fast enough," murmured Mrs. Blaize, in an aside; "they're a stiff-necked, hard-hearted, contradictory lot."

But, after the one outburst, Comongin met his fate like a discrowned king, with a fortitude which was at once farcical and pathetic. He silenced his followers by a sharp injunction in their own yabber, and then approached Mr. Reay.

"Yohi," he said, holding his spear planted firmly before him. "Mine yan, Mine been mumkull Karslake. What for?" he went on, raising his head, and gazing indignantly before him. "What for white man come and sit down close-up Eura, and mumkull poor fellow black? White man got plenty flour, plenty tschugar, plenty blanket, plenty chimbacco. Black fellow want him flour, want him blanket. Baal white man give. White man marra gin belonging to black fellow. Then black fellow mumkull, and white man plenty coola. What for? Baal black fellow pidney. Reay budgery you. Budgery you Gretta. Corbon mine brother belonging to you. Plenty mine along a Doondi. Good-bye, Massa. Mine yan."

Without another word, Comongin folded his old red blanket about him, shouldered his spear, and departed. And Doondi saw his face no more.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BUSH PICNIC.

A WEEK was gone by. Mr. Reay had made his journey to Leichardt's Town, and returned—duly appointed Minister for Works—to superintend the last of the muster, and start the mob of cattle for the north, ere he settled himself in town for the business of the session.

It was the last day of the old year—the day fixed for Gretta's long-planned camping-out expedition.

The week had passed like a dream. Love's spells work quickly in southern sunshine and silvery moonlight.

Gretta was possessed by a feverish unrest, a delicious trouble such as she had never known before, and which she alternately shrunk from and reveled in. Ferguson's heart ached drearily, but he bore his pain like a man. Bertram Wyatt had yielded himself completely to the intoxication of the hour—moonlight rambles, nerve-thrillings when hands touched and voice vibrated, long looks, dreamy talks; and the flattering homage to manly vanity paid in blushes and quickly averted glances. These were sufficient to shut out visions of past or future.

Braddick, in his turn, was buoyantly, unreasonably happy. He, too, had thrust responsibility from him, and lived in the present. He was natural, at his ease, and, under the influence of congenial society and of a subtle sweet sympathy, had cast aside his former reserve and constraint. He talked freely to Isabel, imprudently perhaps, upon all subjects in which they had a common interest—music, art, Australian impressions, his European experiences, only pulling himself up when he found "Old Gold's" jealous eyes fixed upon him with an expression which was full of meaning. In the day-time Mr. Gustavus had the field to himself, for Braddick was out on the run, or working at the head-station, but in the evening he was forced to retire into the background, and it was then he sat apart and brooded on schemes of vengeance.

Isabel, meeting her fate in more tranquil fashion than Gretta, accepted the change that had come upon her without self-analysis, and no more coquettled with emotion than she would have coquettled with a man whom she did not intend to marry. A woman may be slow in owning to herself that she loves and is beloved, but, by intuition, she is nevertheless dimly aware of the fact; and the consciousness which, as is the case in all loftier attachments, has crept at the first meeting into her heart, forces itself forward in its own time, and, to a noble woman, becomes a spiritual truth, a holy obligation, which it would be sacrilege and treason to resist.

And Hester and Durnford! Love was now their master. The brood of emotions born that day of avowal had grown with frightful rapidity into an imperious army, against which it were vain to struggle. Passion throbbed in them

both with quicker pulse-beats, and caresses had become to them as stern a necessity of existence as food and drink.

Just at first, their intercourse had been placid and guarded, and had soothed rather than excited. They talked of their love, but as of something too sacred for expression in act. They called it friendship. They spoke of soul communion, and of the ideal wings upon which affection rises above the plane of materiality. And, as they grew eloquent, their fingers would creep together and their lips meet tremblingly. A world of innocent joy seemed opened to them by the kiss; and why turn away? Could that be wrong which was so beautiful? Could that be poisonous which was so sweet?

Sometimes they would start asunder overcome by vague terror: and brief periods of reaction would follow. Then, each alone—for it seemed a shame, an insult to the purity of their motives, so to buckle and steel themselves against each other—each would silently resolve to abstain from draughts of the intoxicating nectar. There would be a tacit drawing apart, an avoidance of meetings in the lonely cave, nights of self-inflicted torture, mutual misconceptions, and at last the mingling of hearts once more.

The little procession was winding up the range. They had rounded Mount Comongin, and had left plains and timbered ridges far behind. Now they were in dense scrub where the bottle-trees rose weird and white, where the stately bunya-branches drooped, weighted with their heavy cones, and the quantongs shed their berries. Long withes, sometimes coiled like snakes, hung from the upper boughs—dangerous traps for the unwary. The girls' habits were torn by thorny undergrowth, nettles stung the horses' legs, and rotten timber crackled beneath their hoofs.

Two black boys pioneered. The rest followed in single file. Every now and then, there was a shout from Combo or his companion, “Look out, Gretta. Big fellow, ‘guana!’” or, “Plenty gammon White Mary! What for ride along a scrub, when corbon budgery road close up humpey?”

The tomahawks sounded cheerfully as the boys “blazed” a track for the return. It was a rough way, up stone ridges, down steep gullies, over break-neck rocks, and forward again—ever ascending.

Then a break in the scrub, and a precipitous rise, where they were obliged to dismount, and lead their horses. A rocky knoll gained; and now, a glorious view backward toward the ragged fringe of scrub, where red Moreton Bay pines and gaunt gums stood forth, hoary with moss, the untouched growth of years, and beyond, again, endless waves of forest and hill.

It was almost dusk when the highest point below Great Comongin was reached. This was a sort of excrescence of the mountain on its other side, and so invisible from Doondi. They stood upon a tiny plateau surrounded by gray volcanic-looking boulders, and the world lay below. The sun had set, but the glory of him lingered. A grim peak far to the west was outlined against the flaming track he had left. In the east, there stretched, barring the horizon, a jagged fantastic line of mountains—the Tieryboo range—strange humps of rock, great precipices, irregular pyramids. These were faintly pink; and lo! ere many moments, they had become rose, deep crimson, dark and darker violet.

This spot had been chosen for the camping-place. The pack-horse was unladen, and the others hobbled and turned to grass. A small tent was pitched for the accommodation of the less robust ladies of the party. Gretta would have none. She must lie, she said, with her face to the sky, and her saddle for a pillow. The black boys were cutting grass and grass-tree tops, and strewing them upon the ground. The fire had been lighted, the saddle-bags unpacked, Mr. Clephane and Pat Desmond were boiling quart-pot tea. Some of the gentlemen prepared chops for broiling, Mr. Reay spread out an array of pannikins, and Sib was cutting newly peeled bark into plates and dishes.

Captain Clephane stood for a few moments wrapped in contemplation of the landscape. He had a great deal to say about Australian scenery as compared with that of other countries.

“Magnificent!” he cried. “Talk of American mountains—they are too big—too overpowering. Here you have the effect within the limits of comprehension. There’s a bit of coloring; and what a foreground! I wish I had brought my photographic apparatus.”

This was the key-note to a discussion on photography, Mr. Gustavus Blaize remarking in his pedantic manner—

"It combines the advantages of pre-Raphaelism with a breadth, a scope, a greater accuracy—an absence of petty detail." Whereupon the conversation turned abruptly upon the pre-Raphaelite school, and a picture painted some years back by one of its representatives was instanced. The painting had certain features, concerning which the two opinions differed. An argument arose, which only a person who had closely studied the work in question, and the method of the artist, could have settled. Braddick, leaning against the bowlder close by, had been listening with interest to the colloquy. Suddenly he broke in; and, in reference to the mooted points, described the painting with such vividness and accuracy that Clephane uttered an ejaculation of surprise.

"I ought to know that picture," said Braddick, with an absent, half-melancholy laugh; "I've sat opposite it for long enough at a time. It used to be my refuge from the county bores at a—"

He stopped short, and gave himself a little savage shake, and there passed over his face the reckless, self-indignant look, which a man may wear when he sees that he has committed a blunder. He met old Gustavus Blaize's eyes. They were fixed upon him, and alight with a gleam of flashing comprehension, blending with curiosity and triumph.

"At a dull dinner-party, perhaps," put in Mr. Gustavus. "That picture was bought, some time after its first exhibition, by Colonel Westmoreland, of Glen Wold, and hangs in the dining-room at that place. Curious what a chain of associations may be lost for want of one small link. You have just supplied me with such a link, Mr. Braddick. I was staying in the neighborhood of Glen Wold for a day or two, during my last visit to England, and my friends took me over to see it. Colonel Westmoreland and his wife were abroad, but we were shown all over the house. There were some family portraits also. I now recall them distinctly. Strange—strange!" and he chuckled maliciously.

Braddick looked him full in the face.

"You have a good memory, Mr. Blaize," he said, and turned away.

"Glen Wold," said Clephane, "that's in Devonshire. I remember meeting a Colonel Westmoreland woodcock-shooting with Hetherington—the only time I ever was at Heatherleigh. In those days nothing short of the best was

good enough for me. Isabel, you are an authority. Where's Glen Wold? Have you ever been there?"

"No, Uncle Jack," returned Isabel. "It is more on the Dartmoor side. Louisa knew the Westmorelands very well, and stayed there once or twice, but I never went with her. I think Mrs. Westmoreland is delicate, and that lately they have lived abroad a good deal."

Isabel had been watching Braddick. She saw how he had pulled himself together, noticed the expression of his face, and a quivering fear smote her. Dim thoughts began to shape themselves. More than once she had asked herself the questions, "Why is he here? Is it disgrace which has driven him from his home?" And then her heart had always proudly answered, "No; *he* can have done nothing which would dishonor him." So her heart replied now, but, underlying the assurance, there was a feeling of trouble, of vague doubt. Then, as she looked westerly toward the distant mountains, unheeding the chatter and buzz of preparation around her, she thought of her dream in the railway carriage—of the eyes which had gazed so steadfastly into hers—of the words, "love is faith."

An Alpine call echoed back from the rocky side of Comongin, which towered not far from the lesser mountain, the unwonted sound startling the rock-wallabies and caused the browsing horses to turn their heads and whinny in return. Clephane and Wyatt executed an effective jodelling chorus, and young Joe shouted, with unusual gallantry,

"Three cheers for the first girls that have got atop of Little Comongin!"

"Come along with you," said Mr. Reay; "the tea is infused, and I'd like fine to see those chops done. Keep your cheers till you have found the Myalls' Waterhole."

"That mysterious water-hole," said Gretta. "I've all sorts of uncanny fancies about it. Isn't it odd that no white man has come across it?"

"Very odd that Clephane hasn't done so in his many hunts after wild pigs and Tieryboo 'scubbert,'" said Ferguson, with forced gayety. The pigs and the "Tieryboo scrubbers" were rather a chaff in the district against Clephane.

"The blacks say debbil debbil lives there, and that

there's a cave near it full of dead men's bones," said Mollie.

"Sure, and it's the grub we'll tackle now," cried Desmond, lifting a fizzing chop; and the boys exclaimed,

"Here's a feast for the native dogs to-morrow! My word, just listen to them howling!"

Fitful bursts of dismal wailing proceeded from the scrub, but they were soon drowned by the clatter at the camp—the peals of merriment, and the flavor of gum-tree, which the bark plates imparted to the mutton-chops. When the rough repast was over, some one proposed music.

It was night now, and the full moon, a fiery globe, rose slowly behind the distant peak. Of the kind, no more weird or picturesque scene could be imagined. The wild surroundings, gray boulders, forest, mountains, the utter loneliness and vastness of the bush, and the deep-blue sky overhead, gemmed with brilliant constellations. In the foreground, the camp-fire, with its logs blazing up, and throwing broad flickering gleams athwart the rock-bound plateau, and upon the circle of picnickers. Combo and Billy stood in the rear, limbs and eyes dancing. The men lounged in easy attitudes; some smoking, some cutting tobacco, their saddles beside them. Isabel and Gretta sat enthroned on a rug-covered log, their pretty figures showing to advantage in close-fitting habits, their heads bare. Mollie's fair plaits were touched with gold, and her somewhat heavy features spiritualized by the half-lights; while Hester, almost entirely in shadow, her still pale face upturned, looked at that moment the incarnation of a poet's dream.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TAKEN ON TRUST.

MUSIC was proposed, and Clephane, who had a good barytone voice, led off with an Australian ballad. But the native dogs' howl swelled louder. It was the eeriest, most heart-breaking sound.

"Oh! this won't do," exclaimed Mr. Reay; "we shall none of us get any sleep to-night. Who is for a go at the dingoes?"

"Oh!" sighed Clephane, "the noise is very horrible; but it is so in harmony with the scene."

"Call that harmonious?" shrieked Joe, derisively; "here, you Combo, marra daloopil, and come along with me."

Clephane's sporting instinct conquered his sense of dramatic fitness. The party dispersed. Most of the men crept down with loaded guns toward the scrub; the others lingered with the ladies, who had moved away from the fire-lighted circle and were exploring the plateau. There was much laughter over the tracing of a water-course, with a view to the morning's ablutions. Gradually the sounds became more distant. Isabel had drawn into the rear, and now stood against a rock, with her head bent and her hands clasped before her. She was startled by Braddick's voice. She had observed that he joined the shooters.

"I have brought you this," he said, holding out a lace-like woolen wrap. "You don't take any care of yourself."

"Thank you," she threw it over her head, "I don't need to be taken care of now." She was touched by his thoughtfulness, and, as she looked up, he saw tenderness struggling in her eyes. "Why didn't you go with the others?" she asked.

"I don't care about shooting native dogs. I saw you here, and turned back. I wanted to be alone with you for a few minutes—in this place, where we shall probably never be together again. It is a queer wild spot, isn't it?"

"I like it," she answered, simply.

"So do I. Those stones look like the altars of a forgotten worship. We seem out of reach of every one—beyond the power of pitiless reality—in a world of 'might have beens.' I shall think of to-night and of you when I am far away in the Never Never country."

"Is that where you are going?" she asked mechanically.

He laughed shortly.

"It sounds despairing doesn't it? But in reality it's quite a hopeful prospect for me. I may be able to take up good country, and sell it, and so get together a little capital. That's much better than knocking about in the settled districts, and going from bad to worse."

"Yes, much better," she assented.

"I don't want to buoy myself up with any hope of coming back to the Eura, or even of securing the appointment I told you of."

"But that is settled?"

"Mr. Reay may change his mind and turn me adrift."

It's very likely. In that case, the Never Never country will still be my destination. But there's no use in anticipating evil. If all goes well, and I start with the cattle, I might, if I were getting on, be back in three years. Probably it would be much longer. At any rate, you would have gone away; and so to-night can never come over again."

There was a silence. She seemed to wish to break it, and a sound passed her lips, but no words came. It was he who spoke first.

" You would have gone away," he repeated, " and you wouldn't see the good you have aroused in me, and which I hope—no, which I feel certain—will live. But that wouldn't matter. It would be nothing to you." He paused and looked at her. Their eyes met in the moonlight, his questioning, hers answering; but not before the words had passed her lips in an eager sort of gasp, " It would be—a great deal."

His voice deepened and faltered as he went on. " But even if you didn't know, or care, the good would still remain—and the memory of you."

" I should care," she said, very low. " You know that."

" Yes," he said, as if with an effort, " I think you would, little as I deserve it."

She did not speak.

" After all," he said, " it isn't wonderful that you should feel a sort of interest in me. I am an Australian experience to you; one which you wouldn't naturally have in England. There, when a man comes to grief, he drops away from the society of ladies."

" You came to grief!" she said, slowly.

" The fact is evident, I fancy. Whatever pains one may take, it is difficult to quite obliterate the hall-mark of civilization. That's a brand which under existing circumstances ought to have warned you that I wasn't fit company for you."

" Oh! don't speak like that," she exclaimed, pierced by the sadness of his tone.

" Do you remember the night we rode to the gorge," he asked, " and my saying that you had done me good; and that before I left Doondi I would tell you in what way? Shall I tell you now?"

" Yes."

"You have given me back something which was very precious to me once, and which I thought I had entirely lost."

"What is that?" she asked.

"My belief in women; my belief in goodness; my faith in God. You have given me back my ideal. Isn't that worth something?"

"Oh!" she murmured, "it is worth all the world."

"It's worth all the world," he repeated. "No one knows how blank life can be till he has tried living without it. Now you know what I have to be grateful to you for."

Another pause. A volley of shot from the scrub. The dingoes were silent, but the curlews wailed now. Suddenly Isabel said,

"But you had them all the time—faith and trust and goodness. You only fancied that you had lost them."

"No," he answered; "they had gone, and they might never have come back again but for you. I shall like to think of you," he went on softly, "up in the Never Never country when I am alone—in my hut or camping-out after the day's rough work is done."

"You will be very lonely," she interposed hurriedly, with a thrill of womanly pity in her voice; "you will have no books or companions—or anything."

"That doesn't matter," he said; "I am always lonely. But I shall be less so there, for in fancy I shall see you." She moved slightly, and he added, "Don't be angry with me for feeling in this way. It can do you no harm."

"I am not angry," she said, "but I didn't think—" she paused abruptly, and by the moonlight he saw the blush which crept over her face.

"You didn't think?" he repeated.

"It seems so strange that you should think of me like that."

"Not strange," he returned. "It seems to me the most natural and beautiful thing in all the world. But something *is* wonderful," he continued deliberately: "it is that you should take me on trust as you do, and admit me to your friendship. How do you know—how does any one know—that I have not forfeited the right to be talking to you as I am now?"

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed.

"You believe in me?" he asked, looking at her gravely. She met his gaze straightly. She felt that the moment was too solemn for shy hesitation or flimsy pretense. Truth was paramount. He was asking for her trust. She must give it freely or deny it him wholly.

"I do believe in you," she replied.

The next instant she saw in his face how full of import had been his question. He heaved a sort of sigh.

"Thank you," he answered, simply.

After a minute's silence he said:

"I had better tell you that your faith may, ere long, receive a shock. If I am not mistaken, Mr. Gustavus Blaize is aware of something in my past life, which he will probably repeat to my discredit."

"But you—there is nothing?"

"Oh, yes!" he answered sadly; "there is just everything—all that brought me out here and separated me from my own people. And I can not tell you whether the story is true or false. If I am accused, I can not deny my guilt. That's the worst of it."

"Accused!" she cried, her face blanching. "Of what?"

"Don't ask me for the story—I couldn't tell it. If some one else does, you will hear and condemn me."

"I have said that I believed in you, Mr. Braddick—I didn't say that lightly."

He seemed to wince.

"Braddick is not my name," he said, slowly. "I took it—not because I *wanted* to hide my own—I didn't care enough—but for the sake of other people who did care."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, a flash of brightness crossing her face. "I understand. It was all for the sake of others."

An involuntary movement brought her nearer to him, but he made no answering gesture. There was something like dread in his eyes, which were fastened on her.

"I am certain that it is so," she went on, her voice vibrating with an emotion of which in her earnestness she was unconscious. "No matter what anybody tells me, I shall keep that belief; and you can't—you could not—take it away from me."

There was a questioning appeal in the last words which thrilled him with anguish. It was a revelation of her feelings toward him, and it came upon him with a shock of terror and remorse. The sweet mystery which had surrounded

their relations toward each other vanished in a second. He had sunned himself in the warmth of her sympathy, fearing no danger for her, and taking a reckless joy in his own risk. What did it matter for him? he thought. He loved her as he might worship a star. The bare suggestion that he could inspire her with any sentiment but gentle pity had seemed too fantastic, too improbable, for serious consideration. He had thrust it aside, with a jeer at his own vanity. Time was when women had been attracted by him—but now!

Yes! but now, as this young English girl, of his own caste, from his own country, blushed and recoiled before the expression of his face—something stronger than tenderness betraying itself in her eyes and voice—and maidenly pride in her battling with true womanliness—he realized in a passion of humility and of self-reproach into what strait he had blindly led her, and cursed himself for the sorrow he had brought upon her.

He turned away. A groan escaped him as he flung his arms across the boulders, and for an instant laid his head against them.

Presently he raised it. She had moved back, and was standing timid and downcast, one little hand, dead-white in the moonlight, resting on the brown rock. He had a wild desire to cover it with his own, but restrained himself. On the opposite side of the plateau voices sounded. The two parties were returning, and were cooing to each other.

“I can’t let you think that I have been ill-used,” said Braddick, in shaken tones. “It wouldn’t be right—and—it wouldn’t be true. I have done a mean thing in laying myself out to get your sympathy. I had no right to ask you if you believed in me. You mustn’t. *You mustn’t.* For God’s sake don’t glorify me in your imagination. Don’t think of me as a sort of hero. It would be a disappointment to you to be undeceived; and whatever bad thing I might have done in my life, to give you pain would be a worse one.”

Isabel said nothing. The silence seemed long. She looked away from him to the camp where figures were flitting to and fro. The strangeness of the scene impressed itself upon her consciousness like a curious picture, while all the time she knew that he was gazing at her; and, like

a melancholy refrain, his words uttered previously repeated themselves in her mind, "To-night can never come over again." She moved a step or two forward.

"Gretta is at the camp," she said, quietly; "I had better go back."

They walked on without a word. Somebody called to them. It was Clephane, who with Sib was walking in advance of the party from the scrub.

"Isabel, I want to show you a dingo. He's a boomer. Wait here. Combo is dragging him up behind."

Isabel shrunk.

"It's dead—oh, I don't want to see it."

Clephane laughed at her squeamishness. He and Brad-dick halted. Isabel stumbled over a loose stone and Sib put out his hand to help her.

The roughened fingers closed round hers. She had a grateful sense of brotherliness and protection.

"You are cold?" said Sib, looking at her with his patient dog-like eyes. "I don't think you are quite well. Are you?"

"Oh, I'm quite well, Mr. Sebastian."

Sib reddened.

"I wish you'd call me Sib. Everybody does. Sebastian is a mouthful of a name. They oughtn't to have given it to a boorish sort of chap like me."

"I don't think you are boorish, Sib. You are very kind."

"I want to be to you. Look here, Miss Gauntlett. I'll do anything for you. I'd ride overland to Torres Straits if it would you any good."

Isabel laughed sadly.

"I shouldn't ever want anything at Torres Straits, Sib."

"But you may nearer home. And, if you do, promise me that you'll ask me."

"I promise, Sib," returned Isabel.

"You mean it?" he asked, eagerly. "It's a promise. I'll remind you of it if I ever fancy the time has come."

CHAPTER XXX.

CAMPING OUT.

THE night passed like a disordered dream. No one slept much—except, perhaps, Joe, Mark, and the black boys, who had neither troubled hearts nor troubled digestions. The clanking of the horses' hobbles, the wild cries of night-birds, the strange shadows by which the vast circuit seemed peopled, the entire novelty of the situation, chased slumber from most eyes. Those who disdained shelter wrapped themselves in their blankets—each making a pillow of his or her saddle—and lay in a circle round the dying fire. The moon shone during the early part of the night, and Gretta, quoting tales of moonstruck travelers, insisted upon wakefulness and conversation. Strange stories were told of bush ghosts, of phantom stockmen, and the hunters of lonely pools. Pat Desmond, in an awe-struck brogue, whispered legends of murdered diggers, and weird talk flowed till clouds drowned the moon and drowsy heads drooped, to be raised again at the groans of Mr. Gustavus Blaize, who had succumbed to the grasp of his enemy and demanded hot tea and brandy.

Within the tent Isabel, upon her couch of grass-tree tops, lay long sleepless, with a terrible sense of trouble and desolation at her heart. Toward morning she dozed and dreamed, the pain ever present. When gray dawn crept up and the aromatic gums gave forth their scent and the air became alive with the shivering twitter of little birds, shouts of "A Happy New-year to you" rang among the rocks, and all were astir. They saw the sun rise and kiss the mountains, while every hill and crag blushed at his salutation. Then, after a hurried breakfast, the party mounted again. They followed downward a gorge where ferns grew rank, where crimson *kennedia* and *hoya* tapestryed the rocks, and the little pools were covered with iridescent film. Over a ridge, wattle-grown, golden feathers brushing them as they passed, and leaving fragrance with them; into the scrub again, with its majesty of hoary pines, its heavy earthy perfume, its wonders of berry and blossom,

its gloom of greenery. In the center, as it seemed, of the wilderness progress was barred. A deep ravine divided the scrub, its sides too precipitous for foothold of horse. Here Nature's mightiest forces had been at work. The earth was scarred and lacerated, the ravine bed rifted and draggled, stones piled pell-mell, chasms yawning black and unfathomable. In one spot the water-course widened into a lonely pool, begirt with dank arums and deadly-looking shrubs and creepers. The rocks were high, grim, and black. There was a boom of falling water, and an abrupt drop of some hundred feet, and then a little passage, rock-bound, leading into mysterious depths of scrub. At this obstacle there was a halt. Combo shook his head, and, remarking, "Debbil debbil sit down close up; mine nangry along a massa," refused to go further. The horses were hobbled. Mr. Reay, declaring that his exploring days were over, elected to remain, boil the quart-pot tea, and arrange the midday camp. Mollie, the housewife, having in view the scanty store of preserves at Tieryboo, preferred the profitable occupation of gathering wild plums, which were plentiful here, to the fascination of the mysterious cave and water-hole.

"Sure, and it's after scrub-turkeys that Joe and I'll be looking," cried Pat Desmond, shouldering his gun; and Braddick, waiting first to see whether Isabel meant to join Hester and adventurous Gretta in crossing the ravine, decided to accompany Pat.

He had avoided her all the morning, and, quiet and very silent, had ridden ahead with Sib and the boys. Isabel, thus deserted, fell a prey to Mr. Gustavus's amorous assiduities. Old Gold was in high spirits. The apparent coldness between Miss Gauntlet and Braddick augured well, he thought, for the success of his own suit, which he was determined to press at the first favorable occasion. The pedestrian expedition offered an opportunity; and, though he hesitated for an instant before braving the perils of the precipice, love conquered cowardice, and he plunged boldly forward.

The three ladies shortened their habits with saddle-straps, and armed themselves with stout climbing-poles. Wyatt, strong, agile, and an Alpine mountaineer, offered Gretta his aid. Ferguson stood aloof, trimming his staff. She glanced timidly toward him, and then at Bertram, who interpreted

her hesitation, and, man-like, felt the sting of rivalry. He fixed his eyes on Gretta, and said in a low tone,

“ You needn’t be afraid. I’m a better climber than you fancy. Come, give me your hand.”

She surrendered it, and they took the lead; the others following by twos. Clinging to sapling-gums, and balancing themselves by their poles, they at last accomplished the descent.

Torn but triumphant they sent up shouts from the bed of the ravine, which were answered by cooees from above. They had come down slantwise, along a sort of gully bristling with tooth-like bowlders, above and below, which were beetling cliffs with ledges and crannies that afforded foot-hold only to yuros and rock wallabies.

The glen, which seemed gouged out of Mount Comongin’s side, closed in here, pent by scrub-grown ranges. Broken and inaccessible precipices alternated with patches of mallee and spinnifex, grim peaks towering above like the battlements of a titanic citadel; while Comongin’s summit showed through a rift at the upper end, and a small stream of water, having its rise in a mountain spring, flowed down the higher ravine and discharged itself over a wall of rock into the dark pool, beside which the little party stood.

“ What do you say to it?” cried Clephane enthusiastically, waving his hand, and turning to Isabel.

“ It’s splendid, Uncle Jack.”

“ ‘ A wilderness of sweets for nature here
Wantoned as in her prime,’ ”

quoted Mr. Gustavus, a little breathlessly.

“ Don’t say, when you go back to England, that Australian scenery is all dead flat and gum-trees,” continued Clephane.

“ Where are we?” asked Hester. “ Is this the water-hole?”

“ No, no!” cried Gretta. “ This is explored country. Sib knows all about it. The water-hole is somewhere in the scrub close by, and the cave also. But the blacks have a tradition about the place. They used to come here once for red earth to paint themselves with for their corroborees and the Bora; but they say that Puyume, the misty one, drove them away, and now they will go no further than this water-fall, which is the source of the Doonbah.”

“What is the Bora?” asked Isabel of Sib.

“It’s an aboriginal mystery, a ceremony of initiation,” he replied. “A black would allow himself to be killed rather than betray the secret of the Bora.”

“It surprises me,” said Mr. Gustavus, “that the Australian literature, such as it is, ignores all the poetry of aboriginal traditions. Mr. Durnford, has it never struck you that you may be the creator of an Australian Hiawatha?”

“Yes,” replied Durnford, quietly. “But the Eura blacks don’t lend themselves to poetic fancy.”

Gretta turned impatiently.

“Oh! don’t try to throw a halo of romance over the blacks’ vulgar superstitions and dirty ways,” said she. “No effort of your imagination, Mr. Durnford, will transform Combo into a Red Indian hero.”

She moved a little apart from the rest, who also began to disperse, and amused themselves by examining nooks and crannies.

“Why do you despise Australia?” asked Wyatt, following her.

“I don’t despise it,” she replied, with a little thrill in her voice. “It’s very well in its way; but I want more.”

They halted close to the water-fall. He leaned against the stump of a tree, in one of his easy picturesque attitudes, and taking off his felt hat twisted round it a withe of crimson kennedia, then put it on again.

“That’s very becoming,” said Gretta, with slight scorn. He laughed.

“Shall I adorn yours?”

“No, thank you,” she replied.

“I know what you want,” he said, deliberately. She looked at him but did not speak.

“It isn’t a wider arena,” he went on.

She shook her head.

“No,” he said. “Insatiable desire for conquest is often the secret of discontent. But it isn’t so with you. If that is what you care about, I should think your craving might be fully gratified even here.”

“Doesn’t it occur to you that wounded vanity may be at the bottom of it all?” said Gretta, with her light laugh. “Look at my faithless adorer”—with a motion of her head she indicated Mr. Gustavus Blaize, who a little way off was bending in a lover-like attitude over Miss Gauntlett.

"He is proposing, or, if not, the crisis is imminent. I know all the symptoms."

Wyatt laughed in return: "No, no, vanity has nothing to do with it. The excitement of flirtation wouldn't satisfy you. You are thirsting for something much sweeter and more intoxicating."

"What is that?" she asked quickly.

"Love," he answered, looking at her full. "That's the wine of life."

She did not return his gaze, and the laugh under which she tried to hide her embarrassment was a failure.

"It's a beverage that perhaps one is as well without," she replied, hardly. "Certainly it often leaves disagreeable effects."

"There are different kinds," he said. "Some are like bad champagne."

"At all events you speak from experience," returned Gretta, with a touch of her old spirit. "And—and—" she stopped with a little tremble of her lips, then the words burst forth as though involuntarily. "If I were a woman you had loved, and who loved you still, that speech would cure me of my folly."

Her dart seemed to sting him. He shifted from his easy position and stood upright, disconcerted and very serious.

"I see what you think. You do me injustice. I am not quite a cad. To the women who were loyal to me I have been always loyal and true."

"True!" she repeated with sarcasm, which, alas, poor Gretta! she used as a weapon, conscious all the time of its being an undignified one. "Can a person be true many times over?"

"There was never even one time," he exclaimed; "the woman I cared for jilted me. Do you think I wouldn't have waited faithfully for Hermione Baldock if she had been stanch?"

"Hermione!" said Gretta, lingering on the syllables with changed accents. "Is that her name?"

"Yes."

"She is beautiful?"

"Yes." He surveyed her as he spoke. "Not like you. I think that you are more beautiful, but one admires you and her, of course, from different points of view."

"How different?"

"She represents one type, you another. She belongs to the old world, you to the new."

"I understand. Miss Baldock represents civilization, I barbarism."

He made a gesture which indicated that the question did not admit of discussion.

"Miss Baldock has a great advantage over me," continued Gretta.

"I don't think so. You know it is said that one can not serve God and Mammon. Excuse my blunt speaking. The comparison between you naturally suggests itself."

"I don't see why, naturally."

"Don't you? It seems to me that a man instinctively contrasts the woman he has loved with the woman he loves. There! It is out. My fate is in your hands. What will you say to me?"

Gretta uttered a strange little ejaculation, half sorrowful, half interrogative. Her face paled, and her eyes, dilating, gazed seriously into his. She seemed about to speak, then her lips drew tightly together again; she stood silent, with eyes averted.

"Well?" he asked. "You know that I love you."

Gretta turned toward him; but she looked past his face. It was evident that a conflict of feeling was going on within her. Unconsciously her nostrils quivered, and her little head reared itself in native pride. But the expression of her eyes and lips was intensely pathetic. The fancy struck him that she resembled some beautiful savage creature in whom the instinct of freedom rebelled against her keeper's caresses, which were, nevertheless, sweet to her.

"I don't know," she said unwillingly—and then with repressed vehemence—

"I'm not first with you. And I've always been first."

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "You are above such petty scruples. If you care for me, you'll put your hand honestly in mine, and we'll draw the curtain on the past."

He extended his arm, but she kept hers back.

"No!" she said with a touch of resentment. "Lightly won, lightly loved! Do you think I don't know that? You are quite mistaken about me. You look upon me as an ignorant Australian girl—a sort of child of Nature."

"Heaven forbid!" he interposed emphatically. "I don't consider you in the least an unsophisticated person."

Gretta laughed mirthlessly.

"At any rate, I ought to know something about the ways of men when they are in love, since there is hardly a marriageable one on the Eura, or the Doonbah, who hasn't sworn that I am, or was, the sole object of his affections."

"I can quite believe it," returned Wyatt, grimly. "I hope that in other respects you won't put me in the same category as your Australian admirers."

"I have been given to understand that human nature doesn't vary much with climate," rejoined Gretta, in the mocking tone which concealed a more tragic meaning. "I think some of them did care for me," she went on; "and I have observed that those who seemed most cut up took soonest to flirting with some one else. Ordinary men always do that. It's only one out of the common who can go on being fond of a girl and kind to her when she gives him nothing but pain."

"Such a man as James Ferguson, for instance," said Bertram, calmly.

"Yes," said Gretta, frankly. "I was thinking of him."

"I am sorry that I come so far below your standard," said Bertram, slowly and rather sadly; "but I don't think that you really mean all that you have said, or that you look upon me as so utterly weak and wanting in backbone."

His accent touched Gretta to the quick.

"You are not weak. You are strong—horribly strong—but in a different way. It's your cold-bloodedness—I hate it so—which gives you a sort of power. I don't want to yield to it. Now, do you understand?"

"Yes," he answered, "I think I do. I am quite contented to wait till you have made up your mind that I am thoroughly in earnest. You pay a poor compliment to yourself in imagining that I am not."

"It was only a year ago that you cared so much for Miss Baldock," said Gretta. "You will meet her in Leichardt's Town. Are you not afraid?"

"No."

"Then I am."

"Of what?" he asked.

"Of trusting you too much. I was watching your face the other day while you read the account of the governor's reception,"

"Well, what did you glean from my face?"

" You were thinking of her—wondering how she had looked and what she had said, and how she would have looked if you had been present."

" I confess that I was thinking of her," he said; " that was natural enough, and I felt a little bitter. But then, immediately afterward, I thought of you, and was happy." At that moment the sound of a gun, discharged at a little distance, startled them. Simultaneously there was a cooee from the advance party, which had been exploring the ravine and now seemed to be eating sandwiches and holding a council of war.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PASSION'S WAR.

" COME now, Miss Gretta," said Clephane, chaffingly, " flirtations are all very well down by Doondi lagoon when there's plenty of time to spare, but they won't do here. And, as it's a question of being bushed on our ride home, I'm bound to interfere. Hullo, what's that?" as another more muffled shot echoed down the glen.

" Pat after his scrub-turkey," suggested Sib.

" So I thought a minute ago, but it comes from the opposite side if I am not mistaken. By Jove! Suppose we have struck upon Captain Rainbow's retreat—and not a carbine amongst us!"

" Or anything to make us worth bailing up, except Miss Gauntlet's rings and Mr. Blaize's scarf-pin," said Wyatt, surveying the group as he poured some sherry into a pannikin. " I don't think we need be alarmed."

" That shot probably came from near the camp," put in Ferguson. " Sound travels quickly down these gorges."

Clephane consulted his watch. " We had better wire into the grub, and then set off. We have two good hours to play about in. Are you still hot on the water-hole, Gretta?"

Gretta protested that she would find it or die. They eat the sandwiches, and wandered on down the ravine bed, discussing the plan of operations.

It was commonly reported that the scrub on the further side was full of mystery and wonders. Rumor told of a

grove of Oriental palms, of the water-hole with the inevitable Bunyip, of a cave filled with human bones, to say nothing of rare plants and chucky-chuckies and geebongs in abundance.

Each marvel had a special attraction for somebody. Hester wanted to see the palms, and to find a rare fern which they had not in the rockery at Doondi.

Captain Clephane was all curiosity about the bones, and Sib expressed an invincible determination to discover the hiding-place of certain scrubbers which defied him when he was on horseback. So when they reached a broken place in the precipice, and had successfully clambered to the wooded country above, it was agreed that, with compasses, there could be no danger of being lost, and that each pair or party should explore according to discretion, provided always that proper precautions were taken in blazing a track, and that the trysting-place was gained within two hours.

They were all merry: and yet under the ripple of gayety what a swell of passion was heaving!

Gretta seemed to have regained her lost vivacity and flung about jests and smart speeches. Isabel notwithstanding the aching at her heart was childishly exhilarated, her temperament susceptible to the influence of nature, acted upon by the novelty of the scene, the rich luxuriance of the vegetation, the moist, woody smell of the earth, and the brilliant hues and heavy odor of tropical flowers. Hester, waking up every now and then as from a dream, to join in with fitful speech or nervous laugh, was in reality only conscious of a heart-hunger which frightened her by its keenness. For four or five days she had seen but little of Durnford. The presence of guests at Doondi and the Christmas amusements had rendered dual solitude difficult. And then the very dread of espionage galled her pride and wounded her self-respect. To act a part before her sister and her father—to force her features into quietude, to speak to Durnford of ordinary subjects, when her heart was beating almost to bursting with longing for some intimate assurance of his reverence and devotion—was agony and degradation sometimes greater than she could bear. All his scorn of conventional forms, all his strength and tenderness, were needed to soften the smart of her equivocal position. When these failed her she felt helpless and nerveless, while her imagination rioted

in humiliating suggestions, and she convinced herself that she was a burden to him, and that he must despise her.

She fancied now that a change had come over him during the last day or two, not to be accounted for by the fits of reaction to which he was occasionally a prey. He was colder, more constrained, his manner was less watchful and tender. When he looked at her, he averted his eyes quickly; when he spoke to her, it appeared that some painful consciousness checked his utterance. There had been no opportunity for explanation. Even during the ride to Little Comongin they had never been absolutely alone; and now when he took his place by her side, and they walked on in dreamy silence, she felt dizzy from the tumult within her and the strain of concealing it.

The scrub was more open here than scrubs usually are. They kept together for a little way, wandering aimlessly through a labyrinth of ghostly white bottle-trees, over moss-grown stones and fallen logs, till, as they penetrated further, the foliage interlaced more closely overhead, and the gloom intensified, the silence and solitude becoming more oppressive, so that it seemed impossible that foot of man could ever before have trodden in this primeval forest.

Gradually now they divided. The laughter became more subdued, the voices widened apart, and, at last, were only echoes, these too ceasing. Some eager ones pressed forward, others idly lingered, attracted this way and that by a rare creeper, a cluster of luscious berries, a mighty stag-horn-fern that must be chopped down and in some fashion conveyed to Doondi, or a grassy vista stretching along like a vast cathedral aisle where strange shadows seemed to beckon till all had vanished. At last, Hester and Durnford found themselves alone.

Unawares, they had entered a little dell surrounded by precipitous rocks, and strewn with lichen-covered stones. It was not more than a few yards across, and had evidently once been used as a camping-ground by the blacks, for the granite wall was black with smoke, and here and there might be seen half-calcined bones of different animals. A huge Moreton Bay fig-tree flourished in the richer soil accumulated by the washing-down of débris and decaying vegetation from the higher ground, which appeared inaccessible save by a break-neck climb up the face of the precipice. On the slope above, the undergrowth was rank,

save where the bare rock lay exposed, showing fissures and gloomy recesses which might have served as lairs to many a wild beast, were there such in Australia.

Loneliness more intense could not be imagined. Hester raised her voice in a feeble cooee, but only its echo came back to her. A curious tremor seized her, and she felt almost afraid as she looked round the forbidding refuge and up at the wilderness which closed them in. No sound was to be heard except the distant roar of the cataract. The atmosphere was close and still. Even the leaves made no murmur, for not a breath of breeze reached them here.

“What a strange place!” she said, trying to speak naturally. “Where are we?”

“Don’t you hear the water-fall? The ravine lies down to our right; and over there is Comongin. The world is outside of us. We can get no further.”

“Let us stay here for a little while,” she said; “I am tired.”

He took her hand in his, and, holding her a short distance from him, looked at her earnestly.

“What is it?” she said. “I have not vexed you, have I?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“I don’t know. We have been so little together lately, and the last time we met you were cold and reserved.”

“I must be reserved. If I gave myself rein you would shrink from me. Come, we will sit here and rest.”

He drew her to a ledge of rock abutting from the precipice, and, when she was seated, placed himself on the ground at her feet.

“We can get no further,” he added, again. “We have been going blindly on, without steering our course, and now we have come to a dead blank wall.”

She bent toward him with a questioning ejaculation, for his tone seemed to indicate a deeper meaning than his words conveyed. But his eyes were turned from her. She sighed, but said nothing. He threw himself back.

“As I lie here,” he said, presently, “I look straight up to the sky. There is nothing between us and the beautiful endless blue. No prying eyes, no hollow shams, no veils nor pretenses. We dare not let the world see our hearts, but we dare show them to God.”

"Is that true?" she cried. "I try to feel so, but I can not. When I am with you our love seems beautiful and natural; but when we are apart I know that it is wicked, and that it would have been better if we had never met." He raised himself on his arm, and looked up at her.

"Will you take off your hat?" he said. "I like to see your face."

She obeyed.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "You look ill; you look sad; you look unsatisfied."

"I am not ill," she answered, "but I am sad and unsatisfied."

He gave a groan.

"It has all been a mistake then?"

"I thought it would be different," she said, dreamily. "I thought that to know you loved me, to have your sympathy and companionship, would be all that I should need."

"Is it not enough?" he asked, with feverish eagerness which seemed to beg for a negative.

"It ought to be enough," she exclaimed. "What should I want more? But why this doubt and unrest? Why should I torment myself with the fancy that my happiness can not last—that you will weary of me—and that I must snatch at whatever joys the hour gives me? This is not the perfect peace I dreamed of at first."

"There can be no true peace, no true joy for us, till the conditions of our life are altered," he answered, with forced calmness—"till we belong wholly to each other."

She was silent for several moments, he watching her face closely. Then—

"That can never be," she said, very low.

He started to a sitting-posture.

"You say that it can never be. Why? Because you are married. Well, your husband is free to claim you. If he were to do so to-morrow would you go back to him?"

She shuddered.

"No."

"Yet you hold yourself bound," he went on, pitilessly. "What binds you?"

"God's law," she said, falteringly.

"I deny that. The law is of man's making, not God's. God made love; man made marriage."

He waited for a minute, she did not speak.

"Hester," he said, more gently, "have you missed me the last few days?"

"Oh!" she cried, "I have longed for you."

He took her hand and softly kissed it.

"I knew it. Every night—all night I have thought of you. You don't know—It is so ghastly," he cried, "to wake up and to feel that you love me; and to know, with a poet's passionate instinct, that you belong to me, and yet not be able to stir hand or foot to make you my own."

"It was not like this at first," she said, pitifully; "you did not want me so much then."

"I've always wanted you," he exclaimed. "Even before we had met my heart hungered for you as the soul yearns for its mate—But at first it was all strange to you. You were afraid. You didn't like me to talk to you of love. You wanted to call it friendship."

"It is friendship," she said.

"And more—a thousand—a million times more. What is the secret of your unrest? Isn't it that something within you is perpetually struggling to free itself that it may fly to me?" He rose and walked agitatedly up and down the glen. She sat silent and despairingly calm. When he returned to her he too was calm, but very pale. "Hester," he said quietly, "I have got something to read to you. Will you listen?"

She welcomed his changed manner.

"Oh, gladly. It's something beautiful that you have written?"

"I don't know whether it's beautiful or not. It came from my soul; and if intensity of feeling means truth it's true."

Hester leaned back with drooped eyelids and waited. The poet's melodious tones thrilled as he read.

"O love of loves! this once, if never more,
Let the strong, fiery soul within me speak,
Maddened by that strange, sweet curve of thy cheek,
Wild with old dreams that haunted us of yore,
Where murmuring ripples kiss the fern-fringed shore
And pulse along the mountain-shadowed creek.
Here Nature's giant soul condemns the weak,
And seems itself to exult in passion's war.

‘ I love thee, love thee, love thee past recall;
 And hath not love like mine the right to break
 The whole world’s laws in sunder for thy sake?
 The right to claim thee, own thee before all?
 There is no truth in heaven, no truth in song,
 No truth in God, if this sweet thing be wrong.

“ Because I love thee so, I stand alone
 Before thee; and in Love’s high name I say
 That love like ours creates from day to day,
 As God creates the laws its heart doth own.
 All deeds are crimes save one deed, to dethrone
 The craven doubt that turns love’s gold hair gray,
 And palsies passion with infirm delay,
 And changes music’s soul into a moan.

“ Am I not strong for thee? As strong as God:
 Yea, stronger for the moment, in that He
 Just for one hour gives up His might to me,
 And as with lightning finger points our road.
 If I am strength eternal and divine,
 Be thou God’s sweetness when thy lips touch mine.”*

As she listened to the passionate words it seemed to Hester that something fiery and strange came close to her and wrapped her round, drawing her very life so that she could not breathe nor stir. She became cold, and the blood forsook her limbs, and, in the silence that followed, she could hear her heart throbbing. Presently she knew that he had come nearer to her and was at her feet. She flung her hands over her face and bowed herself forward. She was sobbing. He seated himself on the rock by her side, and, drawing down her hands, soothed her gently and tenderly as though she had been a child.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TEMPTATION.

AFTER a minute or two Hester grew calmer, and her eyes met his, the tears quivering upon her lashes.

“ Hester!” he cried, “ we see now that life is worth nothing to either of us without the other. What’s the use of compromise and self-deceptions?”

* The author is indebted for the sonnets to Mr. George Barlow.

"There need be no self-deception," said Hester, with a faint tremble in her voice. "I love you with my whole heart and soul. I'm not ashamed or afraid to own it. If—if we could be married, I think that I should die of happiness. But it's too strong for us. I see now that we were mistaken in ever thinking it could last. The wrong is that we can't be content with a little—we want too much."

"Not more than we have a right to take," he said.

"We have no right," she answered. "If we could make one so easily where would be the need to strive against temptations? There would be no good or evil—no sacredness in marriage, no obligations—"

"What obligations have you?" he asked.

She was silent.

"None," he said. "You are alone. If your child had lived a third would have had to be taken into account. But now, our actions only affect seriously our two selves."

"You forget my father," said Hester. "From the beginning I have been a pain and a disappointment to him. I couldn't be a shame too. And there are my sisters—"

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "These obligations are straws. You know it."

"There is my belief in and clinging to what is right. That's what I must be bound by. It's the strongest motive I've got. It has been like an anchor to me all these years. I've had temptations," she went on, tremulously—"though never like this one. I've longed to break away from miserable associations—from the sense of bondage. I've wanted to be a governess, an actress, a servant—anything to get away—"

"But," he said, "there was nothing strong enough to drag you. And now that has come."

"No," she replied. "The feeling of duty always held me back, and it will go on holding me. I know that it would be wicked to give up everything for you—I know that I should be punished; and that you would be punished through me. I know there would never be any peace for us. . . . I couldn't do it. . . . I'd rather suffer. . . . I'd part from you rather than that."

Again sobs shook her frame. He did not try to soothe her, but got up; and, standing against a projecting rock a few feet from where she sat, looked down upon her.

"We had better part," she said, the sentence ending quaveringly.

"Do you mean forever?" he asked, sternly.

She hesitated. "For a long time—till you get to feel differently."

"I shall never feel differently."

"Oh, why can't it be as we hoped at first?" she said, piteously. "I thought that we should be quite happy if we saw each other alone sometimes; and that after awhile everything would become more natural—"

"Instead of which," he said, impetuously, "it becomes every day more unnatural—more impossible. It is natural that we should belong to each other, and this cramped intercourse is only torture to both of us."

"Oh, don't say that!" she exclaimed, piteously. "We have been very happy sometimes. It was better than nothing."

Her appeal touched him deeply. The expression of his eyes softened to one of the utmost tenderness. "We have been very happy," he repeated. "But I break my heart every day in thinking how much happier we might be."

There was for a minute the sweet silence which is full of memories. "The roses were gathered too full-blown," said Hester, dreamily; "and the thorns have pierced us."

"Yes," he answered; "but they have been sweet."

"I used to wonder why there was so much misery between people who loved each other, in books and plays," she went on—"why there must always be the terrible struggle and wrench or else the getting wicked—why they couldn't be placidly happy. I suppose it's human nature; and that's what makes it so hard."

"It's human nature that we should wish to obey our best instincts. Hester, where is the use of fighting against a law of our being? You spoke of the sacredness of marriage, but have you realized what true marriage is? You don't see it as I see it—with a man's—a poet's—further-reaching vision. Your woman's training, your whole tone of thought, make it difficult, almost impossible, for you to rise above the conventional view of things."

"How?" she asked.

"Don't you see that the essence of marriage is the one thing which makes any union right or holy? Marriage—the form, the body—is nothing. It is of no value; it is merely

negative. Love, pure unselfish love, is the only positive vital reality. That gives man the larger spiritual right which transcends law, and claims the woman's soul forever in the sight of God and man."

Hester was silent, racked by inward conflict. Her nature combined a curious stubbornness and almost Calvinistic rigidity with great impulsiveness and intense susceptibility, so that, while her heart vibrated in passionate harmony with his pleading, her will and all her religious sentiments rebelled against it.

"No," she at last said, firmly, drawing her shoulders together and taking a deep breath, as if gathering in resolution. "I can't feel it. It's no use. It seems that your reasoning is false. . . . Life is hard, and oh, so perplexing," she continued, brokenly. "There's no safety except in keeping to the road one has always walked in. If I turned aside I should not know how to guide myself. Perhaps what you say is true. My training ties me down to what I have been taught out of the Bible, and the rules which helped my mother before me. . . . What would she think of me—or even poor old Aunt Judith, or any good, simple-minded woman? What should I feel if it were my own child who had to make the choice? That's what brings it home to me. Wouldn't I try to keep her from choosing evil as I would try to keep her from killing herself? Oh, I couldn't see her do it. I'd rather she suffered—as I'm suffering. And if she knows—if my mother knew—and they were watching me now!"

Hester's tears dropped thickly. To him they seemed the outcome of a morbid sentimentalism, and he chafed at the thought that a dead child could be made the arbiter of their future. But if he did not sympathize with the phase he treated it with tenderness.

"Darling," he said, "your feeling is womanly and beautiful; but it is not reasonable. Do you think that the dead who loved us—if, as I do not believe, they have any knowledge of our lives—could wish that we should live them out in loneliness and sorrow for the mere sake of being faithful to conventional traditions of right? Self-sacrifice is noble when there is an end to be served, a definite advantage to be gained for the living; but when there is no good to be won, when it is only a dooming of one's self and another to wretchedness—can you defend it?"

"I don't know. If no virtue were good for its own sake, I don't know how we should steer ourselves; and it would be better to die, for we should be always making mistakes."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "your view is a narrow one."

"Perhaps; but I know that when I have disobeyed the simple rules of right and wrong, trouble has come of it. I was wrong to let you remain—after that day. It was all wrong—the secret meetings, and the longings for each other, and the rest. This is like the story of my marriage over again, only in a different way. I deceived them. I did things in secret, and trouble followed."

"Hester!" he exclaimed, in a proud voice, "how can you compare the two cases? You were a child, utterly ignorant of the world, incapable of discerning the character of the man with whom you romantically fancied yourself in love. You didn't know what love, what marriage meant. You made a mistake, and the forfeit you have paid has been out of all proportion with the error. It is monstrous injustice that you should be chained by it. Now you are a woman to whom sorrow has been experience. You have a right to act upon your own responsibility—a right to do what you please with your future. You love me. You ought to be mine. We have proved our love, and you run no risk. You trust me?"

He fixed his eyes upon her in passionate questioning.

"Yes," she answered, with tightened breath.

"Do you trust me well enough to let me decide what is best for you?"

Hester quailed beneath his gaze; but she only shook her head.

"I know that I could make you happy, and in the purest, noblest way. What does anything else matter? We are but units in the world. If you dread shame—great heavens, that's no word for us! If you're afraid of the scorn of idiots, we will leave Australia. Who do you suppose in England or Italy would care what our past had been?"

She looked up at him in a bewildered way.

"Ah, you don't understand!" he exclaimed. "You don't know what has happened to me. Last Sunday's mail brought me letters which have changed my prospects."

"Changed your prospects!" she echoed, blankly. "And you did not tell me?"

"I couldn't till I had thought the matter out; I was determined that I would wrestle with feelings unworthy of you—if there were any such—that I wouldn't let the selfish yearning toward you get the better of unselfish consideration for your real welfare. I knew that the time had come for a decision. I knew that henceforth it must be all or nothing—union or separation."

Hester grew very pale, and a frightened look came over her face. "What has happened?" she asked.

"I'll tell you. I am not now an absolutely poor man. I have had five thousand pounds left me by my uncle at Toowoonan with whom I had quarreled. You know all about that. He died a fortnight ago. It isn't a great deal, but it's what I never expected; and it gives me independence. Then there's something else, strange to say, that very same mail—the other letter I received was from the publisher in Melbourne who brought out my poems, and who offers me a post on the staff of 'The Antipodean.'"

"You have accepted it?"

"I have written accepting it. The letter lies unposted at Doondi. You will tell me whether it is to go down with Stone to-morrow or not."

The pallor of Hester's face intensified. She made two or three futile efforts to speak. At last she said:

"Of course you will send the letter. It would be madness to refuse the appointment."

There was silence for a minute. A little wind had arisen, and the leaves of the fig-trees rustled.

"Hester," he said, "the decision is momentous."

"I know it," she answered. "It means that we must part."

"No," he said passionately; "it means that we will go together."

Hester rose from her seat. She moved forward a few paces dizzily, then stood still for a second with closed eyes. It seemed to her that the rocks were closing in round her, and that light and air were going from her.

Suddenly she lifted her arms with a despairing gesture, and cried, "I can not!"

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "How can I convince you?" He walked away from her, and she sunk back again on the ledge of rock, her eyes wide and solemn following him and meeting his as he turned.

“Don’t make it too hard for me,” she said.

He was at her side in an instant. “I make it hard for you?—I—I? I’ll leave you forever if you can tell me honestly that you’d be the happier for never seeing my face again. But that couldn’t be. It would be unnatural; it would be wicked. Hester, you are mine. I have the right to claim you.”

He came close to her, and put his arm round her, and pressed her to him—lip to lip. They had kissed often before, but never like this. It was as though the pent-up souls of both had rushed together, and could be divided never more. It was like eternity staked upon a single die. They drew apart, and eyes glowed upon eyes. And then again they kissed. At last she tore herself from him.

“George, have pity on me. Leave me. Let me think.”

Still he urged her. He called her his own, his life. He besought her not to separate herself from him.

“Oh!” she cried, in agony, “have pity on me. Give me time. Oh, go—go—my heart is breaking. Let me be alone.”

Remorse seized him. “Hester, my love, my darling! It shall be as you wish—in your own time. I have been cruel to you.”

“Leave me,” she repeated. “I want to be alone. Go a little way. I will follow you.”

He turned slowly. “I will wait for you,” he said. “Come to me when you are ready.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CAPTAIN RAINBOW.

DURNFORD left the dell. He, too, felt bruised and tired, as might one who had been vanquished in a hard fight. So great had been the strain upon his emotions that he comprehended, and in a degree shared, Hester’s longing for a few minutes of respite and solitude.

The gloom and silence of the scrub fell gratefully upon his excited nerves, yet as he emerged from the hollow, which now as he looked back upon it, seemed swallowed up by the rising hills, there was the painful sense of having left her alone to battle with her doubts; and the cruel suggestion

rose that the very place, so like a tomb, in which she had remained, might be typical of the lot she would choose.

Though he had foreseen a crisis and a conflict, he had not imagined that Hester would prove so unmalleable. His experience of her character had hardly prepared him for the tenacity she showed. As advocates in his favor he had relied upon his influence over her, upon the passionate instincts of which he had watched the awakening, upon her indifference to mundane considerations, and upon a certain peculiarity in her mental constitution, which disposed her to look upon life from the standpoint of the abstract rather than the concrete. But the most impulsive, the most yielding, the most unworldly of women may, he now reflected, display a mule-like obstinacy in regard to morals and religion; and, he thought with bitterness, are incapable of that wider purview, logical interpretation, and intellectual grasp of social problems upon which the thinking man prides himself.

He waited for some minutes at the outlet from the glen, half hoping for the sound of a sob or cry which might be a signal for his re-entry. But none came. He had hardly observed before, but noticed now, that the rocks which almost entirely walled in the hollow were riddled with fissures, and here and there showed openings that might, he fancied, indicate the existence of caverns or subterranean passages, leading perhaps into the depths of the ravine.

It was quite comprehensible that some natural phenomena were accountable for the blacks' distaste to the spot, and suddenly his imagination conceived a wild legend, which seemed to take dramatic coloring from the scene he had just gone through; and later, after having laid for years germinating, became the nucleus of his finest work.

He could still hear the water-fall booming, and knew that he was not far from the original starting-point. Guiding himself by the trees he had blazed, he walked on for several hundred yards, then cast himself down, and gave his mind up a prey to the passion of anxiety and longing which had taken possession of him.

Meanwhile Hester sat motionless upon the rock where he had left her, her eyes fixed on vacancy, and her lips drawn tightly together. She made no moan, uttered no sound. The two courses before her seemed to present themselves pictorially to her vivid fancy. On the one side she saw her-

self floating on a stream of joy, lapped in Durnford's love; all that she had thirsted for—the excitement of drama, the thrill of keen sensation, the unpalling delight of sympathetic companionship—hers in full measure. On the other, the automaton-like existence, the chafing against an uncongenial routine, loneliness, barren honor, and aching void.

She shuddered at the far-stretching vista of dreariness, to which there could be no end but death. Why was she so bound? Why was Duty so imperious? Why was Fate so cruel? Then suddenly she paled, her eyes dilated. Lurid and sinister flashed the thought that her husband might die. Hester's bosom heaved; and then she shrunk guiltily, as though the suggestion had been a whisper from the Evil One. She covered her face, remembering with horror an uncanny dream which she had had the night before, the impression of which had been driven away by succeeding agitation—a nightmare inspired probably by the hardness of her grass-tree couch, the proximity of the man she loved, and the strangeness and unconventionality of the situation.

She had dreamed, after the fashion of imaginative persons, a story in which she had seemed at once the narrator and the actor. At first it was misty and vague—a mediæval romance, in which blended a sketch she had been reading in a magazine, of Bianca Capello—Italian figures, and melodrama after Boccaccio, against a background of Australian bush and grim Comongin. There were in the story a wife, a husband, a lover; passion withheld from its consummation; high-minded scruples on the part of the lover; a scheme of murder secretly planned and secretly executed by the wife; freedom from hateful bonds; marriage with the favored one; only a crime buried in the breast of a guilty woman, to poison the bliss of honorable union.

Then it had seemed to Hester in all the weird fantasy of a dream that she was that guilty woman, cold and hot by turns, tortured with dread lest a shadow of suspicion should cross the mind of him she worshiped, drowning remorse and lulling conscience by steeping herself in the raptures of love.

It was their marriage night. She lay by his side. Their breath mingled; he sleeping, she wide-eyed, held by the spell of deadly fear; cold and clammy with the horror of a grawsome thing that interposed itself between him and her—her murdered husband's face, close to her own, her mur-

dered husband's eyes gloating upon her agony; her murdered husband's arms infolding her in a loathsome embrace.

The shriek wrung from her by the extremity of her terror had awakened her. She must have uttered some sound aloud, for Mollie, moving drowsily, had mumbled, "What's the matter? Is it centipedes?" And Hester had answered, "No, only a dream."

The nightmare had haunted her for a little while, and then had been banished by Durnford's presence, and by the fresh air and sunshine. Now, morbid, exaggerated, and fantastic as she knew it to be, it thrilled her with mysterious awe, and like a warning ghost seemed to foreshadow terrible possibilities. She uncovered her face; but the daylight hurt her. Thoughts whirled. She felt sick and dizzy. "I—can't think," she said, in a loud whisper. "I can't decide yet. I must go—and find the others."

She staggered to her feet, and stood pressing her hand tightly upon her breast, as if she were in great pain. She looked round the dell in a scared way, and with the same strange voice said, "It's very hard. Everything is hard for poor women. Why doesn't God make it easier?"

She took her hat, and almost mechanically gathered up some flowers from the ledge where she had laid them. As she moved forward an object caught her eyes. She stopped and gazed in bewilderment. Three yards from her a man stood close to that projecting rock, against which Durnford had leaned. He was a stranger, rough, unkempt, desperate-looking, dressed in dirty moleskins, and wearing high riding-boots, with his Crimean shirt open at the throat, and a pair of revolvers and a bowie-knife slung at his belt—a powerful man with something commanding and dare-devil in his look, fine black eyes, and a coarse, well-featured face, the lower part of which was covered with a stubbly growth of hair.

He advanced, throwing back his head, and half lifting his arm with a gesture too horribly familiar to Hester.

"Ah!"

Her cry was voiceless. Her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. For the moment she seemed petrified. Not till his hand touched her did she recoil. Then she darted from him, and sunk trembling against the wall of rock

while she looked up at him with piteous, terror-stricken eyes.

He came nearer to her.

“Don’t—don’t touch me,” she said.

“What are you frightened of?” he asked. His tone awoke memories. It was the same deep, not unmusical, voice, with its reckless ring, which for romantic Hester Reay had been one of Lance Murgatroyd’s chief attractions.

“I don’t mean to hurt you, Hetty. If that had been what I wanted I could have shot both you and that d——d blackguard, who was making love to you, as easily as I could shoot that bird now.”

He pointed to a Willy wagtail, which was hopping cheerfully from stone to stone.

She shuddered, but was still too much under the influence of the shock either for speech or clear comprehension of the position.

“You don’t ask me how I got here,” he said.

“I—I don’t know,” she answered, bewilderedly.

“You look dazed. Well, I don’t wonder at it. I must seem rather like a ghost to you, Hester.”

“You do, indeed.”

“By God!” he exclaimed, “my blood was hot enough when I saw that scoundrel kissing you. I had my pistol cocked.”

“You were there?” she gasped. “You were listening?”

“Ay. I heard every word. Who is he?”

“He is my brother’s tutor.”

“And now he has had money left him, and wants to cut that game, and take you with him?”

She was silent, but the blood rose in her cheek.

He looked at her for a minute and gave a queer little sound which might have indicated anything.

“Look here!” he said, “I’ve got something to say to you. And I am going to show you something, and give you a chance of getting me hanged.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, still in that subdued voice.

“Come here. Get up.” And he put out his hand to lead her forward. But she crouched back.

“No, no,” she said. “What do you want with me? I will not go.”

" You are shy. But I'm your husband, you know? Seven years' quod doesn't annul conjugal rights."

She rose.

" If you touch me, I'll cry out. There is some one not far from here who will protect me."

" Your lover! and he is unarmed," said Murgatroyd, with sinister meaning.

The poor woman paled again. He watched her, his fierce eyes softening.

" Why won't you believe that I mean you no harm? I am sorry for you, Hetty. It's the truth. I want to talk to you, and I am not safe here. I heard guns on the other side of the scrub, and how do I know who may be hanging about? There are a good lot of you, aren't there?"

" About six or seven."

" What are they doing up here?"

" We came for a picnic."

Murgatroyd burst into a strange laugh.

" I wonder what the hell some people want to come and spoon in a place like this for? They'd stop their billing and cooing pretty quick if they knew that they had dropped upon a bushranger's nest."

Hester uttered a little cry.

" Lance, you are not—you are not?"

" I'm Captain Rainbow," he said, grimly. " You needn't be afraid. They are not worth bailing up; and there are too many of them."

Hester stood like one stunned. When he took her hand and drew her from her shelter she submitted quietly. His manner was not cruel, though it was imperious. On the other side of that projecting piece of rock was a recess, and an opening from it into a still inner chamber, as it seemed, which she had not before observed. The precipice here rose abruptly and to a greater height, and was scooped at the base, and partially overgrown with mulgam shrubs and rank spinnifex.

Murgatroyd paused, and eyed his wife searchingly.

" I'm running a risk," he said.

" If you are Captain Rainbow," she answered, steadily, " you are in danger. The police are after you."

" I know it, but I mean to keep quiet here, and I am not afraid of their running me to ground, unless you peach upon me. Swear to me that you won't do that."

With some indignation, Hester drew away her hand. The dazed feeling had passed off, and in its place had come an excitement which lent her strength, and was a relief after the numb sensation which the shock had produced in her.

"What do you think of me?" she said. "Did I ever do a mean or treacherous thing, willfully? I wouldn't betray you to save my own life. If you have anything to say to me, say it, and let me go."

Murgatroyd seemed moved.

"I believe you. No; in all your tantrums you never were mean. You were always one of the quixotic sort, ready to pitch away everything for an idea, and when that turned rotten to fling it away too—just as you did with me."

The bitterness and the repressed emotion in his tone stung Hester like a reproach which has been merited.

"Lance," she said, "I gave my life to you. If you'd been kind to me, and if I hadn't been afraid for baby—I'd have stuck to you."

"I believe you," he said again, and they were silent for a moment or two. "Swear," he said, suddenly, "that you'll not tell any one you've seen me here."

She hesitated, but answered,

"Very well; I'll swear."

"Not—that man!"

"No."

"By your God."

"By my God," she repeated, in a stifled voice.

He advanced upon her, and, before she was aware of his intention, had seized her round the waist and placed his other hand upon her mouth to stifle her involuntary scream. Repulsion and alarm gave her courage, and she struggled, but in vain. His grasp was like a vise. He lifted her from her feet, and, with great rapidity, bore her through the mulgam bushes and spinnifex, and with some difficulty forced her into an aperture in the rock which looked like the hiding-place of a yura or mountain kangaroo. Bending her almost double, at first, he half-pushed, half-dragged her along a passage leading into the heart of the hill, till suddenly, at the distance of about fifty feet from the opening, it widened, and they were in a cave, into which the light streamed from a hole above.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

MURGATROYD released Hester.

"Now," he said, "if you screamed it could do no harm. I didn't mean to be rough with you, but it was the only way of getting you here without a row. You'd have thought I was going to bury you alive."

She gazed round. Her eyes, dazzled by the beam of sunshine which fell like a pillar from the roof, failed, for a few moments, to pierce the surrounding gloom. Presently she saw that the cave was large and irregularly shaped, and at one end dipped downward. Here there was evidently a spring, for water oozed down the wall into a shallow basin filled to the brim. There was a bed of grass, half covered with a blue blanket, in one corner; and a tomahawk, some arms, and ammunition lay upon the ground. There were a few rude utensils, a pile of wood, and a heap of coals, probably gathered from the ravine bed, a skinned bandicoot hanging from the ceiling, and some scrub-turkey's eggs baking in the ashes that smoldered between two smoke-blackened stones.

"What do you mean to do with me?" asked Hester, trembling in spite of the courage with which she sought to inspire herself. "Are you going to keep me a prisoner?"

"What then?"

"I warn you that we had arranged to meet again in three hours from the time we parted; and, if I am missing, the whole party will come in search of me."

"Do you think they'd be likely to find my hiding-place? And if they did I've plenty of gunpowder. I could keep an army at bay here for a long time."

She let her hands, which she had raised, fall with a gesture of proud defiance.

"Hester," he said, in a changed voice, "I'll not detain you against your will. I see you don't give me credit for a spark of good feeling toward you. You make a mistake." He took out his watch. "It's now two o'clock. How long will you give me?"

"I will give you twenty minutes," she answered.

"Very well. When it's over I'll take you back to the entrance, and you may find your own way back and tell what tale you choose, so long as it isn't the true one."

He moved, and rolled forward a log of wood which he covered with a blanket, and upon which he motioned her to sit.

"I can't do much for you, but I'll make you as comfortable as I can."

"Thank you, Lance," she said, gently, seating herself.

"You look upon me as a brute. It is not to be expected of me that I should treat you as a gentleman would—or wouldn't. Perhaps, after all, you are safer with me than you would be with your poet-lover under the same circumstances."

Again Hester's cheeks grew crimson.

"By God!" he exclaimed, coarsely, the lower element in him gaining a mastery over his finer instincts, "you are handsome enough now to tempt any man. You are not so peeky and puling as you used to be. Hetty, I'm your husband. Won't you give me a kiss?"

The expression of his eyes filled her with disgust. She darted away like a frightened bird which sees itself hopelessly trapped, looking to this side and that, and, at last, making a desperate appeal to his mercy.

"Lance," she cried, "I don't know what you mean to do with me. I'm in your power. But you are not a coward to force yourself upon a woman who shrinks from you."

"You are my wife," he said.

"Spare me," pleaded Hester, "if you have any spark of generosity or any delicacy. You weren't always cruel—when you didn't drink."

"Yes," he said, "that was what did it all—drink. You're right. But ten years' prison-fare has taken that craving out of me. Hetty," and he went nearer to her, with outstretched arms, "you're my wife. I've a right to your kisses. I've a right to you."

"Lance," said the poor girl, retreating further from him into the dimness of the cave, and crouching against the rock, where she looked up at him with agonized eyes, "what good will it do you? You can't care for me. And I—" she drew a deep breath—"I hate you."

He dropped his arms, and fell sullenly back, then stood

silent with darkened face and lips tightly drawn together. His breast heaved; his eyes were on the ground. It was evident that there was a conflict of feeling within him. She, watching him, apprehensive of every movement, saw at last that it was over, and involuntarily heaved a sigh of relief.

“Come out,” he said; “I’m not a wild beast; though, God knows, I’ve been hunted, and driven, and goaded, till there’s not much of the man left in me. I’ll not touch you; I’ll not even ask you to give me your hand.”

She moved forward trembling.

“Sit down,” he said, more gently.

She sunk upon the seat he had placed for her.

“There needn’t be any sentiment between us,” he said, after a pause, “since you don’t like it. Perhaps you have had enough of that sort of thing for to-day. But realities can’t be done away with. You have been married to me; and I suppose you have not forgotten that I am the child’s father?”

A sob broke from her. She put her head down upon her hands.

“Oh, Lance!” she said, “that’s what I’m thinking. That’s what’s tearing at me. It makes it all real. I’m not bad—I—It makes me know that I—that it’s wicked to—that I can’t break away from my life.”

“No,” he said, slowly, “you can’t. A woman is an honest woman or she is not.”

Hester gave a little shudder.

“There’s things you can’t get away from. They’re like birth, or death, or growing old,” continued Murgatroyd with coarse directness. “Love may be a law of human nature; but marriage is one too; and, call it by what fine names you please, it’s a fall when a woman, who is one man’s wife and has been the mother of his child, becomes another man’s—”

A cry from Hester arrested the words on his lips.

“Don’t! don’t!” she cried. “I know it all.”

“The child is dead?” he said.

“She is dead. She is buried at Doondi.”

He uttered an incoherent ejaculation, and seemed to be thinking painfully. Presently he said—

“So that’s over. I thought as much. Well, it’s a good job for her, perhaps. It’s a bad one for you.”

"Yes," drearily assented Hester, "it's a bad one for me."

"The little one would have kept you straight. You're alone now."

"Yes," she repeated.

He made a few steps down the cave, then turned and stopped before her.

"You've run straight for fourteen years. That's a long time. You're not as young as you were. It 'ud be better if you went on. You're in your father's house. You don't want for anything. He treats you well, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Let the rest go. What is it, after all? D——d rot! You proved that with me. The love didn't last long."

She made a deprecating movement with her hands.

"I knew what you'd say. He's a different sort of chap from me. White-handed and smooth-tongued — writes verses — Well, I used to sing them—a gentleman which I never was. But you believe me. You wouldn't get your money's worth. The love doesn't last. It never lasts when it's dragged through the mud. That's human nature; and I've learned it, even in jail and in the bush. A queer thing for me to turn moral!" He paused, and laughed. She shuddered again.

"You'd better stop on with your father. I'll not bother you. I didn't know you were in these parts or I'd have kept out of them."

"You didn't know—!"

"How should I? For all I guessed till I ran down the Eura you were in the old place still. Gippsland got too hot for me, after a scrimmage I had with the troopers—a man shot—and then bushranging becomes a swinging business! Well, I don't much care when the end comes; but I'll never die that dog's death while I have a revolver and a charge of gunpowder left."

"Lance," said Hester, "why did you take to this life? You were free!"

"Free—yes. Free to starve! After I was let out I tried work. No one would keep me. As soon as I got settled at anything the police gave information, and I was hooted off. Then it was a case of tramp. For days together I've gone without food except what I picked up by the road. If you have to live on guanas and kangaroos you'd better turn

black at once. I and two other pals, one day when we were desperate, stuck up Wotonga store, and then we took regularly to the bush. I called myself Captain Rainbow. Did you ever hear of the Jewboy?"

"No."

"He was hanged for bushranging in Moreton Bay twenty years ago. One of my pals got the secret of this cave from him. There's a store of gunpowder here now that he laid by."

"Lance," said Hester, rising, and approaching him with clasped hands, "I am not afraid of you now. I pity you with my whole heart. Give up this bad life. You tell me to live so that I may never be ashamed—and I will—I will. Do you so too. Give it up. Go away to America, or Fiji, where you could begin again."

"I've thought of Fiji," said Murgatroyd; "I might get along there, even if there was a row or two. But I couldn't manage it now. I'm a marked man. And as for beginning again, I'm not the sort to plod on respectably. I never was. I tell you, Hester, the excitement of carrying my life in my hand is the only thing that makes it endurable."

"Oh!" she pleaded, "in another country, where there might be excitement without crime. Try. If you want money, I've a few cattle and horses. I'll get Sib to sell them for me. It wouldn't be much, but it might take you away."

"You'd help me off. You'd do anything short of going with me. I suppose that's it."

"I'd do all I could for you."

"Except go with me? Answer."

"There's a gulf between you and me, Lance, that can never be crossed," she replied slowly.

"Then," said he, savagely, "don't waste breath in talking of impossibilities. It's all to your interest that I should put myself into the jaws of the police. When I am done for, you'll have things your own way; but, mark me, you had better not take a bite out of the apple before you have paid for it."

At that instant Hester realized, with an intensity that staggered her, the extraordinary revulsion of impulse and feeling which the meeting with her outcast husband had wrought. His allusion to her dead child, the revival of

memories full of agony and humiliation, his very coarseness, seemed to have torn away the more delicate growth of later years, leaving the bare stern fact of her life, beside which her imaged future vanished like a dream.

Murgatroyd took out his watch again.

“The time is up. I’ll be fair with you.”

Hester moved, mechanically gathering up her habit. Her eyes were full of tears; she looked at her husband with a mixture of entreaty and relenting.

“I’m glad to have seen you once more,” said Murgatroyd. “When the police give me a chance I’ll get clear of the Eura, and keep out of your way. If anything happens to me I’ll try to get it made known to you through my pals. Good-bye, Hester.”

“Good-bye, Lance.”

She put out both her hands, and he clasped them within his. Thus husband and wife stood with eyes fixed upon each other’s faces. It was a strange moment, one of those crises in existence when words seem a mockery.

He let her hands fall.

“I wish,” he said, hastily, “that you’d think over all that you have got to lose or gain before you chuck up your father and the rest. I’m nothing. I’m only a clog, but you may be rid of me sooner than you count upon, and it’s worth while waiting a bit.”

He gave her one earnest look and then disappeared into the passage through which he had brought her into his retreat.

After a few moments he returned again, and, taking her hand, led her to the tunnel.

“There is no one out there,” he said. “You must crawl along, and when you get to the mouth drop down. It’s better that I shouldn’t run any risk of being seen. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” she repeated, and they parted.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AFTER THE CRISIS.

HESTER did as he had bidden her. The light guided her to the mouth of the tunnel, and then it was but a moment’s work to push aside the mulgam bushes and let herself down

to the level ground. As she emerged from the inner recess she saw Durnford approaching through the outlet in the rocks. He hurried toward her, alarmed by something strange and wild in her appearance.

"Dearest," he exclaimed, "I could wait no longer." He looked at her more closely. "What is the matter? You are so pale. Your habit is torn. It was not so when we came in."

She glanced down. There was a rent in the skirt where it had been caught on a sharp corner of rock as Murgatroyd dragged her through the gallery.

"I don't know," she answered, in a far-away tone; "it doesn't matter."

"But you are so pale," he continued. "Has anything frightened you?"

"No," she replied with a sort of deadly quietude; "I am not frightened."

"Your hand is bleeding," he cried, pointing to where the thorns of a creeper had pierced her flesh. He took out his pocket-handkerchief and wrapped it round the wound. She submitted with a painful delight in being thus tended — perhaps for the last time. Mistaking her gentleness, he stooped and kissed her wrist; then, with a gesture of appropriation, placed her hand within his arm.

She drew it back.

"Let us go away," she said, in that same quiet voice.

She tied on her hat, and they walked side by side to where the rocks opened. She turned then, and took a long look at the dell, glancing round the encircling precipice and up at the scrub-covered range, and the turret-like summit of Comongin rising behind.

"No one would ever find this place," she said, thoughtfully, "unless they happen to drop upon it unawares as we did."

"No," he answered; "it is very likely that we are the only white persons who have ever entered it."

"No man on horseback could get here?" she asked.

"It would be impossible to ride across the ravine," he said; and added, surprised at her tone, "Darling, why do you speak so strangely?"

"We shall never come here again," she replied.

"But the world will be ours," he said, "and we shall be together in other places as wild and beautiful as this."

He watched her narrowly as he spoke. Her face was like a mask. At that moment a cooee pierced the glade. Hester started, and moved on in haste and agitation.

"Come," she said, "they are looking for us. Don't cooee yet. I don't want them to find us here."

She almost ran in her eagerness, stumbling over the loose stones, and pushing her way through the overhanging boughs. Now she paused and glanced up uneasily at the white marks he had made upon the trees.

A deadly fear blanched her face. She turned to him. "They'll think," she said, slowly, "that the track has been blazed on purpose."

He eyed her in concern and wonder.

"What then? Who will think? Hester, I am sure something has frightened you."

"I didn't want any one to know—to find out where we have been," she said nervously.

"Oh, that is what troubled you!" and he smiled in relief and joy. "Sweetest, neither black nor white man is likely to pass this way before the bark has grown again. The spot will henceforth be sacred to us and to our love."

She trembled violently. "No, no."

"Dear one!" he said, trembling also from the excess of his emotion, "our compact is sealed, is it not? Our lives are consecrated to each other. You have decided?"

"Don't speak to me of it," she exclaimed, passionately. "I am not fit now. Take me back quickly to the camp, and then leave me. At Doondi, I will tell you. Only let us make haste now."

Her extreme agitation filled him with anxiety. He saw that she was completely overwrought, and blamed himself; while again he urged her to tell him if anything had alarmed her while she had been alone. But she only shook her head and hurried on. He took her hand in his and guided her silently, sometimes almost carrying her over the obstacles which impeded their rapid progress. Now and then he cooed in answer to the calls which at intervals rang through the scrub.

Hester seemed to become calmer as they neared the trysting-place. The remainder of the party had assembled at the edge of the ravine, and were lounging, chattering, and sifting their floral spoil. Some of them were in poor plight, notably Gretta, whose habit had come to signal grief, and

Captain Clephane. He, however, exhibited with pride a magnificent orchid, for which he declared that he had risked his neck.

“What adventures have you had?” cried Gretta, as the two laggards approached. “Have you found the cave?”

“No,” answered Durnford, while Hester grew white to the lips and sunk down as if exhausted on the grass.

“Or the water-hole?” continued Gretta.

“No,” said Durnford, again. “I thought that was the object of your search.”

“So it was,” returned Gretta; “but I don’t believe in the cave, the water-hole, or the debbil debbil. They are all myths. I mean to talk seriously to Combo on our way home.”

“Everything is a myth,” observed Wyatt, in a melancholy tone, “especially,” he added, in an aside to Gretta, “the pleasure of exploring in a company of three.”

“Bertram is disappointed,” remarked Clephane; “he thought that he had sighted a land-bunyip up a bottle-tree, and it turned out to be the head of a jew-lizard of phenomenal proportions, in combination with the tail of a bandicoot.”

“And what discoveries did you and Miss Gauntlett make, Mr. Gustavus?” asked Gretta, mischievously, turning to Old Gold, who, in a discomposed manner, and with bilious energy, was readjusting his gaiters. Gretta bawled her question a second time before he turned, nervously alert.

“We—we—we found the grove of palms, Miss Reay.”

“Are you sure they weren’t grass-trees, Mr. Gustavus? You know that under certain circumstances your imagination works wonders. Only the other day when you were walking with Miss Gauntlett it turned a native componuon into a heron.”

“Poof, poof!” cried Joe, who advanced staggering under the weight of a yellowing bunya-cone. “We refuse to swallow the palm-grove without evidence.”

“His sandals were with travel tore,
Staff, budget, bottle, scrap, he wore;
The faded palm-branch in his hand
Shewed pilgrim from the Holy Land,”

promptly returned Mr. Blaize, himself again, holding forth a veritable palm-frond.

“Did you climb the stem yourself for it, Mr. Gustavus?”

asked Joe, impudently, "or did you send up another monkey to fetch it down?" whereupon Joe was rebuked by Gretta, and Isabel appealed to for particulars.

The young girl turned very red. She envied Gretta her Australian *sang-froid*. Gretta's experience in flirtation had placed her beyond the possibility of embarrassment in the presence of a disconcerted suitor, but Isabel was still a long way from that moral elevation, and she looked pained and conscious, and markedly averted her eyes from Mr. Gustavus's direction.

"I was not with Mr. Blaize when he found the palms," she said.

"That won't do," exclaimed Joe; "you started together."

"And you came back together," averred Mark.

"No," corrected Joe. "They were three yards apart. They weren't speaking. They looked as though they'd had a quarrel. Did you quarrel, Miss Gauntlett?"

But Isabel evaded the question by moving away, and just then Ferguson broke in—

"Mrs. Murgatroyd, I am sure you have walked too far."

Hester shook her head. Durnford's sad inquiring eyes, meeting hers, sent the blood to her cheek for an instant, but it faded immediately, leaving her ashen pale. Ferguson poured a little brandy and water into a pannikin, and made her drink it. When she had done so, she declared herself quite equal to the climb, and begged that they might return at once to the camp.

"I think that Hester must have seen the Bunyip," said Gretta, buckling up her habit, "she is in such a hurry to get off."

Captain Clephane carefully strapped his orchid on his back, and Joe shouldered his bunya-cone. Presently they were in the bed of the ravine again, with the precipice towering forbiddingly above them; and hand in hand began the climb. A feverish energy sustained Hester. She knew that the moment of collapse would come, but it must not be yet. Gretta, flushed with excitement, seemed to exult in difficulties. Isabel, the frailest of the party, had the largest body-guard.

On a rock, midway, with his legs dangling and a pipe in his mouth, sat Pat Desmond, who announced that the horses were saddled, and that he had been sent to hurry them up.

"And it's for wanst that I am the better of you," he cried, holding out his stick for Gretta to catch.

Braddick was descending more leisurely. Supporting himself against a grass-tree, he stretched his pole down to Isabel, and, when she had gained sure footing, retreated higher, and repeated the assistance. Clephane, who was a capital mountaineer, did the same for Hester, and the ascent was accomplished with less danger than might have been expected.

Meanwhile, at the camp, Mollie Clephane had filled one of the saddle-bags with wild plums, chuckie-chuckies, and the scrub-turkey's eggs, which Pat and Braddick had brought. Then she took out her knitting, and worked placidly under the shelter of a rock, congratulating herself upon having chosen the better part.

Mr. Reay made up the fire, and boiled a billy of tea for their joint refection. He held a long discourse with the black boys, and might have wormed the secret of the Bora from Combo had not a "sugar-bag" attracted the attention of Billy, and the three forthwith proceeded to chop it out of a venerable iron-bark tree. He next started an opossum, and with much zest burned the brute out of its refuge in a hollow log. Then he amused himself gathering quantong for a necklace for Jinks, and—after giving orders to have the horses saddled, and bidding Pat and Braddick cooee for the others—finally composed himself to sleep under the quantong-tree. He was awakened by the arrival of the exploring party, and turned, dazed and drowsy.

"What's the row? Have the tailing mob started again?"

He had been dreaming that he was overlanding cattle. "Why, God bless me I have had a doze; and it's getting on in the afternoon. Let's be off, and get down the range before dark."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BACK TO DOONDI.

CONVERSATION flagged during the homeward ride. The party had a battered and depressed air, and a casual observer might readily have discerned that since the departure from Doondi something momentous had happened to several of its members.

The tired horses jogged along heavily, and even Joe, Mark, and the black boys, who led the front, seemed dispirited. A good deal of hesitation was shown in regard to the pairing-off. Two or three of the gentlemen dragged despondently behind, and there was an evident restraint between the couples who had been most cordial at starting. Mollie and her husband were the only two who talked cheerfully. Hester clung to Sib, and Gretta and Isabel found themselves together. Both girls laughed a little consciously.

“Well?” asked Gretta.

“It’s nothing,” returned Isabel, drearily.

“It’s just—everything,” said Gretta, with an emphasis, a tone of voice that Isabel had never heard in her before. “That is,” she added, with her little laugh, “it’s everything to somebody.”

“I don’t know quite what you mean, or who should care so much.”

“Not Old Gold,” answered Gretta, lightly. “He’s a hardened subject. I think,” she said, impulsively, “that this is the very strangest beginning a new year ever had.”

“For me,” interrupted Isabel. “Yes, that is true.”

“And for me. I wish I knew if I were happy or miserable.”

Isabel looked at Gretta in surprise. Such a spasmodic burst of confidence was rare. The Australian girl was not, outwardly, given to sentiment. She wondered whether there had been a misunderstanding with Ferguson, or whether Wyatt was veering round from his old allegiance. If so, it was natural that Gretta should feel embarrassed and remorseful at inflicting pain. Then, with a shock, there came upon Isabel the realization of the absorption in herself and in Braddick which had made her blind to the affairs around her.

Gretta resumed in a different manner. “We look a draggle-tailed set, don’t we? One wouldn’t say there was much tendency to flirtation about us—or pride of conquest. Isa, don’t let yourself be disturbed by a proposal from Mr. Gustavus. It’s quite an every-day occurrence, I assure you.”

“Oh, Gretta! Of course it’s nonsense.”

“Dreadful nonsense! The wound is only skin-deep. It doesn’t go further than his vanity. He did me the honor

not long ago. Before that he was the victim of a misplaced passion for Hester."

"Mrs. Murgatroyd?" exclaimed Isabel.

"It was at the root of his prying into Mr. Durnford's concerns, and ferreting out the secret of 'Soul and Star.' I suppose he hoped that something disgraceful would come to light."

"But why?"

"Oh, now you see the absurdity. He took it into his head that she had inspired the poem. We have always chaffed Hester ever since about her poet. They are both up in the clouds. Poor old Hester! No fear of her coming down to earth. She has had her dose of practical romance. It was enough to sicken her."

"He is vindictive, then," said Isabel, thoughtfully.

"Mr. Blaize? He is devoured by the green-eyed monster. I have no doubt he would have taken vengeance on me if you hadn't diverted his attention. At this moment I am sure that he is horribly jealous of our handsome drover."

Isabel uttered an inarticulate "Oh!"

"Was he tragic?"

"Yes; I didn't know what to say to him."

"You want practice. It's quite necessary on the Eura. Mr. Braddick is a gentleman I see."

"I know that."

"But there's a mystery about him."

Isabel was silent.

"Old Gold has a genius for scenting mysteries. Something he said to-day made me fancy he was on the trail. Don't be nervous, Isabel; I have got some comfort for you. He starts for Wyeroo at daylight to-morrow. There'll be a general collapse."

"Every one is going—"

"Mustering on the Selection—except Mr. Ferguson and Mr. Wyatt, who are off to Gundalunda. After all, it isn't much consolation. I know Gustavus's ways. He'll refer to his diaries and cudgel his brains, and if there's any disagreeable revelation to be made he'll write it. He is far too great a coward to throw his own bomb."

"You don't really mean what you are saying, Gretta. It would be too improbable that Mr. Blaize should know anything to the discredit of—"

Isabel did not finish her sentence; she spoke anxiously.

"I'm not serious," answered Gretta, laughing. "I'm only imaginative. I like inventing situations; it's so nice to infuse a little melodrama into this 'eucalyptic cloisterdom,' don't you know. But it isn't so improbable," she continued, after a pause, during which some inequalities in the road had divided them. "Most gentlemanly Englishmen one comes across out here without money or friends can be tracked back to the time when they had both; and there must have been a reason for their having lost them."

"There may have been reasons which were not dishonorable."

"Perhaps; anyhow I am quite ready to believe there is nothing bad about this Englishman—I like his face—I should trust him."

"Who is this fortunate Englishman whom you would trust, Miss Reay?" asked Wyatt, riding up. "I hope you don't insinuate that Englishmen as a rule are not to be trusted?"

"I think so, but—Why? since you were born in Australia."

"I count myself half, if not wholly, an Englishman. Was it Braddick?"

"Yes. Is he trustworthy, according to a man's view?"

"Oh! I'd go by a woman's instinct. It's like a dog's. A man is either a gentleman or a cad, you know—as Grand-court says in 'Daniel Deronda.'"

"Appearances are deceptive," rejoined Gretta, with levity, which had a suspicion of nervousness.

"What makes you so cynical?"

"Painful experience. I'll give you an instance. Jack Clephane once got hold of two new chums by hazard. One was delightful and a mystery. The other an ill-mannered dolt. I lost my fancy—I won't say my heart—to the mystery, afterward discovered to be a very disreputable person, and, alas! I rejected the dolt, who one mail-day was transformed into a baronet, with a rent-roll and a castle. Think of the chance I lost."

"I sympathize with you—look out for that log. But the rent-roll and the castle might have been dearly purchased at the price of the dolt's society."

Gretta paused to seize a parasite lily which hung temptingly. There was a check. Isabel moved forward to join

Ferguson, who rode a few yards in advance. Gretta fastened the blossom in her habit.

“Isn’t a well-regulated English mind superior to such a consideration?” she asked demurely; “I hope that under those circumstances my mind would have regulated itself very quickly.”

“Oh, I see that I was mistaken,” said Wyatt, bitterly. “The feminine standpoint is much the same in both worlds. Let me recommend you to invest in a Book of the Peerage and a Register of the Landed Gentry. You’d find them useful.”

He diverged, skirting a bowlder, and then they dipped into a gully.

It was now late in the afternoon, and to the east the sunset sky shone between the trunks of the lanky gum-trees. They were emerging from the mountainous region, and, as they rose on the crest of the gully, looked toward a low horizon. Before them stretched wave-like undulations, bluish green in hue, barred, at one point only, by the cleft side of Knapp’s Cliff, which lay to the right of Doondi and facing Comongin. They lingered here for a moment, admiring the view, but it was an artifice of Wyatt’s to get out of ear-shot. They were the last of the party, and could see the little procession winding down, Mr. Reay’s white shirt showing against the blackened grass-trees, and the black boys’ crimson handkerchiefs worn contrasting with the somberness of the thickly wooded bush.

“I have no castle to place at your disposal,” said Wyatt, abruptly, as they moved on again, “but I have more to offer now than I had eighteen months ago.”

“More than you offered Miss Baldock? I ought to congratulate myself,” said Gretta, with a sort of passionate sarcasm. A moment later she hated herself for having so spoken.

“You are fencing with me,” said Wyatt, deliberately drawing in his horse, and looking at her in a manner which compelled Gretta’s mental acknowledgment that he was her master; “you have been holding me at arm’s-length ever since I told you that I loved you. I have had no answer. Why? Why did you insist upon Ferguson and the boys joining us in our search for the water-hole?”

“There was no reason why they shouldn’t look for the water-hole, too.”

He gave a short laugh.

"No; there wasn't. I am churlish and discontented at having been kept waiting. I am beginning to believe what people say of you."

"What do they say?"

"That you like to dangle your admirers on tenter-hooks."

"And you object to being classed with other people, Mr. Wyatt? You want everything your own way."

"Frankly, I want one particular thing my own way. Is that so unnatural?"

"I suppose not. I like my own way too."

"Don't fence with me," he pleaded; "give me my answer honestly."

"It is difficult to know quite what the question is you wish me to answer."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "I'll put it briefly. Do you care for me a little?"

He held out his hand toward her, and his fine earnest eyes glowed on her face. He looked the picture of a chivalrous knight very much in love. So Gretta thought. He was surely in earnest. But— There was a dart which pierced home, and her own pride drove it. For a moment her form swayed in a delicious gesture, her eyes melted, her lips parted. But she bent herself back, her form curving like that of a proud Diana. He stooped and laid his hand entreatingly on the pommel of her saddle. She shook the reins. Brunette made a bound, and the distance between them widened. When they were together again she turned to him without tremor. It was much better he should think her a coquette. Yet she had a secret consciousness that he knew her for what she was, as his next words revealed.

"Come," he said, "I'll combat all your arguments if you'll state them fairly."

"I have none," said Gretta.

"You don't tell me that I am nothing to you?"

She was silent.

"Let me imagine," he continued, "that you like me a little, now, and may love me by and by."

"If the first is all you ask?"

"It is enough—for my purpose—at present. Here is an opening for conditions, and I want to know what yours are."

"I don't impose any conditions," said Gretta.

"Then a pledge. Far better," he urged.

"No, not that," she exclaimed; "nothing here, or for a long time."

"When and where, then?"

"We shall meet in Leichardt's Town. But not then. Not till after our return," said Gretta, with slight agitation.

"I had no thought of going to Leichardt's Town," he answered.

"Oh, I wished it!"

"If that be so, and you are there—then it is understood that I go."

"Papa has promised me a taste of gayety. He must be in town, since he has taken office, and we shall go soon. It will be an early session. The members of the Leichardt's Land Club give a ball to the new governor some time in March."

"I see. You look upon the ball as an ordeal for me."

Gretta did not answer.

"I don't shrink from it." He waited a minute, and then said, "I respect your reserve. I think that I fathom its motive. But notwithstanding—won't you believe that you have made me very happy? If you would only give me a word—a sign that you care a little for me!"

Gretta's cheek flamed, but she shook her head.

"Nothing?" he asked.

"No, nothing."

"Not even the flower you have just gathered?"

She shook her head again.

"I am afraid of you," he said. "At least you will name a definite time for my probation? Don't be hard on me, and keep me dangling too long. The return from Leichardt's Town sounds so vague. What if there should be another political crisis or a prolonged session?"

"You'd survive it," Gretta's laugh rang silver-like. The taste of power over him intoxicated her.

"This is New-year's-day," he said; "let us divide the year into quarters. At the end of three months I shall claim your answer."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "that does not give you time enough."

"I can only repeat that you pay yourself a bad compliment," he returned gravely, and they rode on for a few paces in silence.

The horse's heads were even, and the arm which carried her whip lay loosely. He lifted the gloved hand and kissed it, but made no further demand for word or for flower.

The fine aroma of courtliness about his wooing pleased the refined anti-Australian part of her. The fear, so swiftly conceived of love, lest he should find her wanting in delicacy, bare of maiden bloom, pricked her for an instant and brought the blushes.

They were on level ground now, and the sun had set. The others had spurred forward. Gretta and Wyatt followed example, and there was a swinging canter across a bare flat, and then a spurt after a kangaroo, which infused some new animation into the party and broke it into new combinations. Dark fell. The stars came forth. Aldebaran and the Scorpion shone resplendent. The night insects burst into sound. The darkness was a veil, hiding sad faces. Subtle sympathies played beneath it, and hearts drew near under its tents. Braddick and Isabel rode together for the first time that day. It was a confession, on his part, of the craving to be with her which had been sternly repressed. The peaceful melancholy of the night comforted them. They said little, yet every commonplace word was touched by the sweetness and emotion of the hour, and by the mystery and foreboding which lay in the background. Afterward, when Isabel tried to recall the conversation, she could remember nothing but trivial, inconsequent sentences; though the thrill of them, and of his looks, the impression of his half-averted profile, the scent of the aromatic gums, the spears of the grass-trees, and the wonder of it all, and the beauty, lingered vividly.

It was ten o'clock before they reached the slip-rails. Near home the horses had become brisker, and Gretta was herself again. They had started a chorus, as was their wont, to the accompaniment of cracking whips, in order to announce their return. Hester did not join in it. It had not been generally noticed how pale and silent she was, and the dazed manner in which she held her reins, letting her horse take her as it would. Sib rode stolidly a yard or two in advance of his sister, taciturn as usual, but not unmindful of her, and throwing back an occasional warning. "Look out for this point, Hester! Hold on! Paddymelon hole!" and so forth.

Durnford, hovering near, was on the alert; but when

once or twice he approached her she turned upon him a gaze of dumb beseeching and silently motioned him back. He knew instinctively that her nerves were strained to the breaking, and trembled for the reaction from excitement and fatigue which she must suffer upon awakening to herself. She was stunned now—in a dream. He realized this more strongly when he watched her dismount at the court-yard. She slipped heavily from her saddle, stood for a moment as if uncertain of her whereabouts, and then feebly mounted the wooden steps. She paused again: her form swayed. She stretched out her arm and blindly groped for the veranda. No one else seemed to observe her except Maafu, who held her horse, and ejaculated in alarm, “Missee Murgatroyd!” There was necessarily a little confusion in the court-yard, and all were self-engrossed. The dogs barked, the young black boys exchanged confidences with Combo. Jinks called out eager queries about the Bunyip and the water-hole, and Mrs. Blaize, standing at the edge of the veranda, was voluble in her exclamations:

Durnford sprung up the steps and supported Hester as she was falling. He felt that her hands were icy, and the mingled moonlight, and the lamp-light streaming through the open doors, showed him the ghastliness of her face.

“Mrs. Blaize!” he cried; and in a minute Aunt Judith had loosened the strings of Hester’s hat, and was administering brandy, which brought the life back again, and gave the poor girl strength to stagger toward the open door of her bedroom.

“Dear heart!” exclaimed Mrs. Blaize. “Hester! who never minds the heat or how far she rides! Now, if it had been Isabel who’d have wondered? Ye’ll come straight to bed, my love, and I’ll bring my old man to you. If there’s any one that’s equal to an emergency, with all his wits about him and his medicine-chest primed, it’s Mr. Blaize.”

“Eh! Nonsense!” said Mr. Reay, really anxious, and chafing his daughter’s hands. “She doesn’t want physic, she’s but wearying for her rest. The dingoes didn’t let any one get a wink of sleep last night—at least I don’t think so. There—she’s coming to.”

Hester roused herself. “Don’t bother about me,” she said; “papa is right. I only want rest. Oh! please go away,” she added, with pitiful effort. “You must all be tired too—and I’m quite well. Good-night.”

They dispersed. Aunt Judith fussily lit the candles within the bedroom. Durnford, pale and full of anxiety, leaned against the veranda-post, his eyes fixed upon Hester.

"You will not let me do anything for you?" he asked.

She stood like a statue. Her eyes only seemed living. He never forgot the look she gave him.

"Good-bye!" she said, and turned to look back once again. "Good-bye," she repeated, very low, and, then entering, closed the door.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MOLLIE, DON'T BE HARD.

IN the early morning Mollie Clephane was awakened by a tremulous tap at her door. She opened it, and was horrified at the ghost-like figure which stood at the threshold. Hester, her face as pale as the white dressing-gown she wore, black circles round her eyes, dilated pupils, drawn features, and teeth chattering.

"Mollie!" she gasped. "I think I'm ill. I have been shivering, and I've had faint fits. Have you got sal-volatile—or anything?"

In a moment Mollie had thrust herself into a wrapper, and was searching for her husband's spirit-flask.

"Don't wake Jack," chattered Hester, clinging to the lintel.

Mollie led her across a sort of bath-room, into which the Clephane quarters opened, to a cedar-lined back-veranda chamber—Hester's own. Here she put her into bed, and drew the blankets closely round her. Hot summer morning though it was, something like death-dew had risen on Hester's brow. She shut her eyes, and the bed shook with her shivering. From that she passed to faintness. Mollie chafed her hands and forced brandy down her throat. Strong as Hester habitually seemed, it was not the first time Mollie had ministered to her sister in like condition. After her flight from her husband, once secure under her father's roof, Hester had succumbed in the same way—fainting and shivering fits had succeeded each other, resulting in complete prostration for days.

"A shock to the nervous system," the doctor would

have said, but on an Australian station need must be imperative for a doctor to be summoned fifty or a hundred miles; and medical aid, save such as Mr. Blaize might be able to afford, was the last thing which entered Mollie's head. She was slipping out of the room with the intention of seeking Aunt Judith when Hester, divining her thought, rose in bed and as well as her shaking teeth would allow, commanded her to remain.

"Stop with me. I don't want any one to know. I will not have Aunt Judith. Mollie—sit down."

Mollie obeyed, and continued to rub her hands and give her brandy at intervals. After a time the shivering ceased, and Hester lay, without speaking, holding Mollie's hand tightly. The day broke into activity. There were the usual morning sounds, the running up of horses and milkers, the cracking of whips, Maafu clattering the milk-pails, the sound of men's voices in the court-yard, Clephane calling to his wife.

Mollie went to the door.

"Don't tell him," pleaded Hester.

"What's up?" asked Clephane.

Then a murmur.

"Tell her to take it easy to-day. We are all off to the Selection. The roan bull has bolted again. Isabel and Gretta are knocked up too. Look after Isabel. She is brittle. I should think you have all had enough of camping-out. Good-bye, old girl."

Mollie came back again. The sun streamed in through the chinks of the blind, revealing the disorder of the room. The sun streamed in through the chinks of the blind, revealing the disorder of the room. It was evident that Hester had passed a restless night. Little bits of torn paper were scattered about; the blotting-book was open on the writing-table, the pen in the ink-pot, and both candles burned into the sockets.

"You have been writing," said Mollie; "it's those plays again."

"A play!" said Hester, hysterically.

"There's no use in it if it sets you shivering. Before, it turned your mind."

"I was like ~~his~~ before!" said Hester, swept by a flood of remembrance.

"Yes, when you came home."

“I know.”

Hester sighed heavily, and remained still again. The sounds outside increased. Mr. Reay seemed giving last orders, and then a party rode away.

“They’re gone,” said Mollie.

“Who?” Hester gazed bewilderedly.

“Every one: Mr. Ferguson, and Mr. Wyatt, and Gustavus Blaize; and the rest mustering.”

“They won’t be back till the end of the week?”

“No.”

“They wouldn’t go after cattle—where we were yesterday?”

Hester’s voice thrilled anxiously. Mollie laughed.

“Back of Little Comongin! Nobody would go there except after calves to nugget.”

The children had got out of their little beds, and were scampering about with bare feet on the boards. Water splashed into the zinc tubs in the bath-room; and Jinks was heard remonstrating with the half-caste girl who was the Clephanes’ nurse. Mollie placidly expostulated through the wooden partition.

Hester lay still, vaguely wondering whether days or years had passed since she had heard the same sounds on the morning that they had started for their expedition. She had confused images of a black gulf into which she seemed to have fallen, and of the children chattering heartlessly on its brink, and the world going on the same while she sunk out of sight. She had become numbed by the intensity of a resolve to which she had worked herself. Everything appeared dream-like. She shrunk from light and noise and the commonplace routine; and yet, in one sense, they were welcomed, as awakeners of sensibility.

She observed Mollie’s restlessness. It was part of her dream.

“You want to go to the children? Don’t mind me.”

“I’ll set the door open, and I can see what they’re about,” rejoined Mollie; “I’m afraid of your going off shivering again,” and she admonished Jinks “to be good” because Aunt Hester was tired, and to come in on tiptoe and have her tapes and buttons fastened. Jinks was reasonable. Her big black eyes scarcely left her aunt’s death-like face. She had conjectures about the frightening effect of the Puyumé, of whom Combo had told her: but she re-

strained her curiosity. Barty, however, showed fractiousness, and required humorizing. Grim, fantastic suggestions flitted through Hester's mind, and the homely prattle interwove itself strangely with the tragic forebodings which were haunting her. Under her pillow lay a letter to Durnford which she could only have written upon the spur of revulsion. She knew that upon the morrow she might wish it recalled. That must be put beyond her power. It must be delivered. She must be saved from her own weakness. This was her predominating thought. In her need she instinctively turned to Mollie; and the children, the prosaic details, Jinks's rasping little tone, seemed to represent the life from which she would have broken away, and to which she must henceforth cling for salvation.

"Mollie!" she exclaimed, excitedly, "I've got something to speak to you about—something you must do."

"In a minute, Aunt Hester," put in Jinks, demurely; "we are saying our prayers first."

The little half-dressed creature, with naked feet turned up, knelt at Mollie's knee.

"Please God bless papa and mamma. Oh, Barty, don't!"

The pink toes presented an irresistible temptation to Barty, waiting his turn behind.

"Barty!" interjected Mrs. Clephane, with severity. "Go on, Jinks."

"Please God bless—Barty, don't—please God wait one minute while I kick Barty."

There was an irreverent outthrust on the part of Jinks, which ended ignominiously in a howl. Hester burst into hysterical laughter and fell to shivering again. The children were expelled, and their prayers put off till a more seasonable moment. By and by the station-bell clanged, and Hester besought her sister to go and dress and have breakfast.

When Mrs. Clephane came back she was her decorous, matronly self, in blue gingham and an apron, and the children had gone forth, so that there was peace in that part of the house. Mollie put the room straight, and expended her sympathy in practical ministrations. There was something soothing and reliable about the housewifely presence. Hester professed herself better, and a shade of color came into her corpse-like cheek after she had swallowed some tea and a morsel of toast. Every now and then she moved

her hand and nervously fingered the letter beneath her pillow. She watched with grateful eyes the movements of her sister, who seemed to strike her in a new light.

At last she said with a note of wistfulness in her voice—

“ You are very good, Mollie. I think you’d stand by me if I were in trouble.”

Mollie raised her violent eyes reproachfully.

“ Why? What are you thinking of, Hetta? Of course I would. There are only the two of us—real sisters, you know?”

“ Yes. But you’ve gone straight and I’ve gone crooked. You are always solid and comforting, and I’m afraid I’m often discontented and tiresome,” said Hester, hugging self-reproach. “ I don’t seem to be like any one else.”

“ Well, no—you are not,” admitted Mollie, “ you are all ideas. But I can’t think why you should fancy that I wouldn’t stand by you. Next to Jack and the children, I care more for you than any one. I wish you would tell me if there’s anything wrong, Hetta.”

“ Yes,” said Hester, “ there’s a great deal wrong.”

She took out her letter, and held it with the address downward.

“ Is that for Bill Stone?” asked Mollie, referring to the departure of the mail-bag.

“ No! Mollie,” she said slowly, “ I am very unhappy. I feel as though I couldn’t bear it by myself.”

“ Tell me,” said Mollie; “ it will be better for you to have it out.”

“ I must have it out,” said Hester desperately. “ Now that there’s an end of it I don’t care if you think me wicked.”

“ Wicked!” repeated Mollie, wonderingly; “ it is not the old thing?”

Hester did not answer.

“ Have you heard from that man?” asked Mollie, with animation.

Still Hester was silent.

“ You know, Hetta, it is foolish to worry,” continued her sister; “ I told you so before. Jack says it is quite impossible that he can ever do anything to you.”

“ I am not afraid of that,” said Hester, in a hushed voice.

"What is it then? You're not—oh, Hester! You're not wanting to be free?"

"I should think that most women in my position would wish for freedom," said Hester, bitterly.

Mollie's look had in it something like fear. "It's so long ago," she said, as though reflecting aloud. "If it had been Gretta—But you are so different, you are older than I am."

"Past caring for happiness? I've had my chance, and it's wicked to wish for another."

"There's no one," said Mollie, in a shocked, bewildered tone.

"No one?" repeated Hester. "Oh, if there were not!"

"Hester!" cried Mollie, "oh, Hester! If that is the happiness you care about—"

"I don't care for it. I only want to be good. Can't you see that I am fighting myself? I'm crushing it down."

Raising herself upon her elbow, Hester went on with gathering agitation—

"I've had a shock that set me against everything, and made me hate myself. I want to get away from it. Mollie, you must give this letter. If I didn't know how it would hurt him I shouldn't mind so much. But I can't see him—I can never see him again."

The bewilderment deepened in Mollie's eyes, and a blush crept slowly over her fair matronly face.

"Oh, Hester!" she exclaimed once more.

"You think it very bad," said poor Hester, beginning to tremble as before. "But," she flamed out, "because people are married and bound must they be stones—without feeling?"

Mollie took the letter and read the direction. She gazed in horror at her sister. Her slow imagination at first barely grasped the situation. She could not realize that the tragedy had been enacting under her own eyes, and that she had been blind to it.

Hester stretched out her hands with a piteous gesture.

"You see?" she said.

"Yes," answered Mollie with a gasp; "now nothing would have made me believe it of you."

"Mollie, don't be hard. It's you happy women who should never be hard. Think of me. I hadn't a child to love—I am all alone."

“Oh!” cried Mollie. “I know, I know I *am* sorry for you.” The true womanliness in her came forth. She moved to the side of the bed and gathered Hester to her bosom, as though the elder woman had been a child. For a few moments neither spoke. Then Mollie said,

“He must go away.”

“This is to tell him that I can never see him again,” whispered Hester.

“How long ago is it?” asked Mollie.

“Not long since he told me,” answered Hester in the half whisper. “But we began to love each other long before—from the first. He didn’t mean to tell me—but I—it was forced from him the time he meant to go away. Mollie, I can’t bear to have any more deceiving. I feel as though I didn’t care if every one knew. But it’s going to be over, and for his sake I’d rather you kept it from Jack.”

“I will not tell Jack. No one shall know. It will only be between us two sisters.”

“He wanted me to go away with him,” Hester went on, brokenly. “He has got some money from Mr. Raikes, and they’ve offered him a post in Melbourne.”

“Oh!” Mollie shuddered, and held her sister closer.

“I know—it is terrible. And the bad part of it—Mollie, I think I would have gone if something—I can’t tell you what—hadn’t turned my feelings and made me see the horror of it. But I love him so much that I am afraid. I can’t bear to see him suffer. It tears my heart. Oh, Mollie, it is so terrible to think that we only want to be together to be as happy as the angels.”

“No,” said Mollie. “You wouldn’t be happy in that way. It’s all wrong.”

“As happy then as the devils!” cried Hester with the ghost of a laugh, “if their sin is to have been too human. But you’re right, Mollie, and there’s something stronger in me than the longing to be happy. It’s hard to reason about duty; and yet there it is—a dead wall there’s no use to knock against.”

Mollie was silent for a minute or two. Her practical mind was revolving emergencies. Hester disengaged herself from her sister’s embrace, and lay back on the pillow looking exhausted.

“I will give him the letter,” said Mrs. Clephane. “I

will give it at once, and I will tell him that he must leave Doondi without waiting to see father or Jack."

"You won't say cruel things to him, Mollie?"

"It wouldn't be my way, dear—with any one so much cleverer than I am. I am very angry with him, but I am sorry too. One can't help feeling sorry. I'll try and make him feel that—and that he must go."

"He will have to give a reason," said Hester, weakly combatting the position, now that she had created it.

"They will all wonder. It will be hard for him."

"It need not be," returned Mrs. Clephane, promptly. "The boys are having holidays, and there was the mail last night—we came in too late for anything to be said. If he has been offered a good appointment—and Mr. Raikes's death—there's reason enough."

Mollie rose. Hester took back her letter, and gazed at the envelope through a mist of tears. To send the letter was to seal her fate. She knew that he would not question her verdict. The yearning to see him once more was like physical pain, and its repression a fierce dagger-thrust. She wished now that she had written differently. Her farewell was so cold—so definite. She had left no loop-hole for future possibilities. But what possibilities? The bare suggestion turned her sick with shame and self-dread. He would perhaps believe that she did not love him! Oh, no—that was impossible. Although the phrases might seem passionless, he must surely feel that throbs or anguish had forced them forth.

"I am going," said Mollie. "Give me the letter."

Hester surrendered it, and flung herself down with her face to the wall.

At the door, Mollie turned back, pityingly, to lower the blind and smoothe the bedclothes over her sister's prostrate form. Sobs convulsed Hester.

"Don't cry," said Mollie. "Hetta, you mustn't cry. You know that you have me to love you—and the children. And you'll think about little Maggie—and if she were alive and you thought of her—you could not—"

Mollie's tears fell too. Hester's sobs did not cease; but she motioned her sister away.

"It's best to get it over," she said, brokenly. "It's like good-bye—to everything."

Mollie went on her errand.

The time she remained absent might have been minutes or hours for all that Hester knew.

No one came to the door. Mollie had said she was sleeping. She lay in a state of torpor, but she seemed to hear the beating of her heart above all other sounds; the scraping of Maafu's hoe beneath her window; the buzzing of a mason-fly on the pane; the distant lowing of cattle; the chatter of parrots in a gum-tree by the garden-fence—and beyond all and through all the knell of separation.

By and by Mollie entered again, and stole to the side of the bed. Hester's miserable eyes looked from the whiteness of her face and of the pillow, but no words came.

Mollie put a letter in her hand.

"This is his answer," she said.

Hester's fingers closed convulsively upon the envelope, but she did not attempt to open it. Mollie waited, as if in expectation of her doing so.

"Not now," murmured Hester. "By and by."

"He is going," said Mollie. "He will be in Leichardt's Town to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" repeated Hester, in blank misery. "So soon? Impossible."

"He will ride by moonlight, and be at the Wyeroo terminus at day-break."

"Why so soon?" said Hester, faintly.

"He said that since you desired it he would obey quickly. He told me to tell you that he could not leave before evening because he had some farewells to make."

"Ah!" said Hester, with a groan. "I know what he means. He will say good-bye to the cave."

"The cave!" repeated Mollie, wonderingly.

Hester was silent.

"Mollie," she said, presently, with an ache in her voice, "did he—how did he bear it?"

"He was cut up," returned Mollie, slowly, feeling her inadequacy to describe. "I did not think men took things like that. I suppose," she added, with her unconscious literalness, "that it's because he's a poet."

"He—broke down?"

"I gave him your letter to read before I said anything. He was up at the Quarters. For a minute or two it seemed as if some one had hit him a blow; he sat down and never spoke a word, but looked straight into the air."

“Then?”

“He asked me if you had heard from your husband. Have you, Hetta?”

Hester moved uneasily.

“Don’t question me about Lance, Mollie. It makes no difference—go on.”

“He wanted to argue it all out with me—to justify sin”—the tint of Mollie’s cheeks deepened. “He didn’t seem to believe in the Bible—or anything. And then—I talked to him.”

“You talked to him?”

“I don’t know what I said, Hetta; I couldn’t tell you. But I just thought of Jack, and the children, and of the awfulness of your being cut off from us all, and from good women. Oh, Hetta, think of it.”

“Well! that is over.”

“But the dreadfulness! One’s child, perhaps, having the right to reproach one. I said that to him.”

“You were cruel. Why have made it harder?”

“He insisted upon seeing you. He would not believe that you did not wish it.”

“I dare not,” cried Hester, wildly; “I love him so. I—”

The remembrance of that delirious lip-meeting, in which her very soul’s strength seemed to have been drunk, swept over her. She turned away her face.

“It was then I spoke all that was in my heart,” said Mollie. “I begged him to spare you. At last he consented to go away this evening. He sat down to write. I could not bear to see him. I went out to the veranda. He brought the letter to me. Oh! Hetta, don’t cry so.”

Hester was sitting up in bed, her hands before her face, and her loosened hair falling like a veil round her. She threw it back.

“Go now, Mollie; don’t trouble about me any more. I want to be alone.”

“He made me promise,” said Mollie, hesitatingly, “that if anything should happen—if you should ever be free—I would write to him.”

“Oh! don’t, don’t,” cried Hester, in sharp agony. “Don’t make me more wicked than I am—”

She opened the envelope when Mollie had gone, gently

and tenderly, as though she were touching a relic of the dead.

The letter was very short.

“ I leave you, since this is the service you require of me. But remember always, in union or separation, I am entirely yours; and when you need me a word will recall me.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

“ HE IS ROBERT WESTMORELAND.”

THE days dragged heavily. Durnford was gone, and Hester, languid and nerveless, kept much in her room. It was happy for her that the state of nervous prostration to which she had been reduced numbed her powers of thought and sensibility. Acute pain would be a later experience.

The mustering-party remained absent during the whole of the week. Once or twice Sib came back for rations or on an errand of inspection, and reported that cattle and extra hands were being collected at the Selection and at Tieryboo, where Captain Clephane was active, and that the droving-party would stay but one night at Doondi before starting north.

At length the afternoon came when the roar of beasts imprisoned in the stock-yard was like the sound of the sea, and the back verandas and space about the dairy and meat-store were filled with men and black boys—Braddick and Desmond filling ration-bags with flour, tea, and sugar, dividing figs of tobacco, and marshaling groceries; Sib and his contingent weighing salted meat, others splitting green hide, polishing bits, and punching holes in saddle-straps, while Mr. Reay and his son-in-law occupied themselves in the office with the tallies of the cattle, the lists of brands, the drovers' charges, and other serious preliminaries to an overlanding trip.

In the midst of these preparations Bertram Wyatt and Ferguson rode up. They had come over from Gundalunda to bid the detachment good-speed.

It was not till the sun had set, and the bushmen had refreshed themselves with a swim in the creek, that Captain Clephane found leisure to open and consider a letter from

Gustavus Blaize, which had arrived for him during his absence.

He had settled himself comfortably on a lounge outside Jinks's nursery, and, loosely attired in pyjamas, with a pipe in his mouth, was about to enjoy a half hour in the company of Mollie and the children.

"Pat made a capital hit in Braddick, Moll," he was saying. "He's a first-rate chap—a real man, and sharp, too. I am thinking of going in with him for new country. I have always thought that I might do a good stroke of business by taking up blocks out west and selling them as unstocked runs. If I had any one on the spot with a good eye for grazing pastures—and reliable. Next to no expense, you know—and clear profit."

"There's the leasing from Government, Jack," put in prudent Mollie, "and the chance of not selling. And then we don't know anything about Mr. Braddick. I am sure that it would be better to wait and see how he turns out on the trip before settling with him to take up new runs."

"Oh, of course," returned Clephane, a little testily, "there's no hurry. I 'cotton' to the man, as your father says, because he is a gentleman and of my own caliber. I dare say there's something shady in his background, and one is bound to be careful. But a great many backgrounds out here are shady. No one supposes that a well-born Englishman comes down to droving for his own pleasure. I'm convinced, notwithstanding his seediness when he came here, that there's nothing of the cad about that fellow."

Jinks rushed up.

"Oh, father! tell Barty and me a story. Mother, I know how father's stories come. You see they're in the pipe, under the tobacco; and when he lights it the stories get too hot, and they go up the pipe into his mouth, and then he can say them."

Clephane laughed: "That's it, Jinks. But wait till I've read this letter. I'll have smoked down to the story by that time."

"Then I'll go to Mr. Braddick and Cousin Isabel by the fig-tree," said Jinks, "until you are ready. Mr. Braddick does not say funny words like Pat, but he gives us a great deal of 'formation about butterflies, which is very interesting."

Jinks ran off. Captain Clephane shook out the four

sheets of thin paper in Mr. Blaize's elaborate handwriting, "Good Lord! what the deuce does Old Gold want to write to me about Braddick for?" he exclaimed.

He read the letter, in a rush first, uttering a few forcible ejaculations, and knitting his brows in a perplexed manner. Then he turned back to the beginning and read it again—this time with fuller comments:

"Cheek! Writes to me as Isabel's guardian! Thinks he perceives signs of an incipient attachment! The deuce he does! Feels it his duty to apprise me of his discovery. The Westmorelands of Glen Wold! By George, there's something in it! That's how he came to know all about Milner's painting! I wish I had a head for family romances! There was a nephew! I'll be shot if I didn't hear some tradition about him! I'll write and ask Louisa! No; what's the good of stirring up mud to bespatter a poor devil who owns himself sick and fain a saint would be? That's the long and short of it! As for Isabel, the idea is monstrous! And she is sitting under the fig-tree with him! Go and fetch her out, Moll."

Mollie had been listening in bewilderment.

"What is it all about, Jack? You don't mean that Isabel is in love with Mr. Braddick? Oh!" she sighed, under the consciousness of a heavy burden, "all the trouble in the world comes through people falling in love with each other."

"Why, Moll," exclaimed Clephane, "you are developing romantic tendencies. What is the tragedy? I believe that Durnford proposed to Gretta upon the strength of Raikes's legacy, and that you are in the swim. Was that why he scuttled away out of the back door?"

"No—no. But Isabel—Jack, now you put it into my head, they've been a great deal together."

"According to Jinks they're together now under the fig-tree. Swoop down like a destroying angel upon their paradise."

"Jack, you *won't* be serious. Tell me what is in the letter."

Clephane sat erect and took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Right you are, Moll. It is not a laughing matter, though I don't feel concerned on Isabel's account. Trust Louisa Hetherington for imbuing her with all the proper notions about settlements, position, and matrimony in gen-

eral. She is sorry for Braddick—finds him pleasant to talk to. But the idea of regarding seriously a man who hasn't two coats to his back, or two sovereigns to jingle! She'd as soon think of Maafu as a lover. That's not the point. This letter contains an accusation against Braddick."

"An accusation?" repeated Mollie.

"A history. Briefly this. Jealousy has stirred Gustavus's bile. He is a man who keeps diaries and remembers facts and faces. It seems that Braddick's face always struck him as familiar, though he could not remember where he had seen it. The night we camped out on Little Comongin he and I got talking about a painting of Milner's which had been bought by a certain Colonel Westmoreland, of Glen Wold, and which Braddick had evidently studied across a dining-table. That was natural, since he turns out to be Colonel Westmoreland's nephew."

"Do you believe it, Jack?"

"I think it is more than probable. Gustavus was staying in the neighborhood of Glen Wold, went over the place, saw the picture in question, and some family portraits besides—one in particular, by Sir Thomas Lawrence, of Colonel Westmoreland's father, whom he declares our drover exactly resembles. A curious notion, that of identifying a man by his grandfather's portrait."

"I don't think it's possible," said Mollie.

"Far-fetched, I admit. But there was a painting of young Westmoreland, the nephew, who Gustavus solemnly asserts is Braddick the drover."

"And what if it is true?"

"Ah, now for the family romance, Moll! Old Gustavus referred to his diaries." Clephane glanced at the letter.

"This is what he says: 'I always jot down my experiences and impressions. I had been struck by the two portraits, and by the fact, which I had heard incidentally stated, that at the death of the present owner Glen Wold would no longer belong to a Westmoreland. I thought it sad that so fine a place should pass out of the direct line, and made inquiries of my friend and host as to the fate of the nephew. The story was a painful one, but was well known in the neighborhood. Colonel Westmoreland and his wife were childless, and he had brought up his nephew—an orphan, and penniless—as his heir. Young Robert Westmoreland was put into a cavalry regiment; he was handsome, charming,

and extravagant. The uncle and nephew were, however, on excellent terms till the latter announced his engagement to a young lady living in the house as Mrs. Westmoreland's companion. This young lady is now Colonel Westmoreland's second wife. For reasons which may be inferred, the relations between the two men became somewhat strained; and debts were not paid so readily. Finding himself in difficulties, Robert Westmoreland forged his uncle's name on a check for a considerable sum. The affair exploded and became public. Colonel Westmoreland had actually instituted legal proceedings, but was induced to stay them by the entreaties of the young lady, whom, some time later, he married. Young Westmoreland—ruined, branded, and disinherited—left England for Australia. Here he is known as the drover Braddick. This I can prove by the fact, which I have ascertained within the last day or two, that his land-order was taken out in the name of Westmoreland.'"

Clephane paused. Mollie's face was full of pain and perplexity.

"What are you going to do, Jack?" she asked.

Clephane got up and paced the veranda in a perturbed manner.

"Here's Isabel," he said presently. "I'll see what light she has to throw upon the subject."

"Oh, Jack!" exclaimed Mollie, and retreated within doors. She had a woman's intuition that this appeal to Isabel was the kindling of a fuse.

The young girl approached through the vines leading Jinks by the hand. Something in her air struck Clephane. She looked sad, but there was a dreamy consciousness in her face which disquieted him. Acting on impulse he went to the edge of the veranda, the letter in his hand. "Come here, Isabel—Mollie was just going after you. Off with you, Jinks. It's close upon dressing-time. I have no story for you this evening."

Jinks wanted to argue the point, but was peremptorily bidden to depart. Isabel stepped on to the veranda; and leaning against the wooden pilaster, with her face turned sideways, nervously twisted a tendril of the rinka sporum round her fingers.

"What is it, Uncle Jack?" she asked.

Clephane sat down again in the squatter's chair and re-

lighted his pipe. "I suppose, my dear, that you have no intention of settling for life in Australia?"

Isabel blushed pink, and laughed faintly: "Uncle Jack! No; you won't be burdened with me beyond the year's end."

"It was Mr. Gustavus Blaize, I believe, who did you the honor of making the suggestion. Tell me, has Mr. Braddick any views on the subject?"

The color deepened in Isabel's cheek. "Uncle Jack," she said, with no little dignity, "I don't like jokes which are in bad taste."

"Nor I. This one seems to me in particularly bad taste. Read for yourself." And he handed her Mr. Blaize's letter.

He watched her very closely as she perused it. Her head was for a long time bent over the paper, and he saw that she turned very pale. She made no comment, however, and he could not have divined by her face, when she raised it, how deeply she was moved. It was very quiet, and there was a fixed look about the lips and eyes. She let her hands fall, with the letter between them.

"Well?" he asked.

She did not answer for a moment, then said, brokenly, and with an almost piteous accent: "Well! Uncle Jack—I—I don't know."

"You mean that Braddick hasn't confided his history to you?"

"No—" She paused, overwhelmed by the remembrance of what he had said to her on the camping-out. This, then, was the accusation which he had warned her he could not deny. Braddick was not his name. He had said so. He had hinted at disgrace. And yet he had almost asked her for her faith. She would give it royally.

"He has not tried to enlist your sympathy?"

She shook her head. Had he not passionately implored her not to glorify him in her imagination?

"I won't speak to you of Mr. Blaize's insinuations," continued Clephane. "The idea is preposterous—insulting. It is the creation of a jealous fool."

Isabel's breath came more quickly, but she disdained to reply.

"This letter is a mean melodramatic attempt at revenge, worthy of Gustavus Blaize."

"Gretta prepared me for it," said Isabel, masking her agitation.

"But there may be truth in the charge. You should know something of it. Surely you have heard Louisa speak of the Westmorelands?"

"I have heard her speak of the Westmorelands," Isabel repeated, slowly.

"They've stayed at Heatherleigh?" asked Clephane.

"Once. It was a long time ago. I was in the school-room."

Clephane took out his pipe and expelled a volume of smoke. "Is it true that Colonel Westmoreland married his late wife's companion?"

"I have heard so much, Uncle Jack."

"And the nephew—he is a fact, I suppose? Gustavus gives no dates. Let me see!" He held out his hand for the letter, but Isabel's fingers closed more tightly round it.

"Have you ever heard of him, Isabel?"

There was silence for a minute or two. Isabel's eyes were fixed outward. At last she spoke:

"I believe Colonel Westmoreland had a nephew, who was disinherited. But I never knew for what reason. I remember, now, something being said—Louisa speaking of him—but it is so long ago; and I had no interest in the people—"

There was another silence. Isabel's thoughts were working painfully backward through a labyrinth of confused memories. Lights broke unexpectedly, and seemed to bring fragments of the past into relief. Suddenly she exclaimed,

"Uncle Jack, what are you going to do?"

"The question is," said Clephane, "whether I destroy this precious epistle, and let Braddick go in peace with the cattle to-morrow, or whether—I show it to my father-in-law and to Braddick, and insist upon an explanation."

Isabel's eyes flashed. Without a word she tore the sheets in two, then across again till only small pieces remained. The action pleased Clephane. It showed that she was a girl of spirit, and also seemed to indicate that she resented Mr. Blaize's imputations upon her attitude toward Braddick.

"There!" she exclaimed, when she had scattered the scraps to the winds.

"You need not have done that," he returned. "Gustavus Blaize will get the contempt that he deserves; and you don't suppose that I would have mixed your name up in the matter?"

She burst forth agitatedly, "How? You won't stab in the dark. Let Mr. Blaize accuse him face to face if he chooses. He won't dare. As for me—it is nothing. If he be young Westmoreland, and for some reason of his own has changed his name, that's no concern of ours. We are not his judges."

"One has usually a weakness in favor of employing honest men," said Clephane, dryly.

"Honest! He is honest: more—he is honorable. You can't look in his face and not see that he wouldn't do a bad or mean action to save his life. His life!" repeated Isabel, "he doesn't care for it. It hasn't been made pleasant to him. He was glad of this prospect of starting afresh. And to be branded at the outset—with a suspicion!"

"He has the option of denying the charge."

"Oh!" she cried with intensifying anxiety, "if he is young Westmoreland, and could have denied it, would he be here now? There is some good reason—I am certain of it. One has intuition about people. I feel that he is good. The past should not be allowed to poison the present. True or false—it is no matter to me. I don't want to know. He may be keeping silence for the sake of others."

Her vehemence and the tremor in her voice startled and alarmed Clephane. He laughed, but in a troubled manner.

"These romantic notions don't wash in real life," he said.

Isabel raised her arms, which had hung down in front of her, and loosened her clasped hands with an impetuous and significant gesture, as though she were sweeping away all doubts and pettishesses.

"It is no matter," she said again. "And if romantic notions make us think more kindly of the unfortunate"—she faltered, and her language came forth brokenly, "and when they make no real difference to ourselves—in our own feelings—and might bring hope and comfort to one who had suffered—they shouldn't be discouraged." Isabel halted, afraid of her gathering emotion; but it found vent in scorn: "Do you think he can not be trusted? I will answer that he does not steal your money or your cattle."

“Isabel!” exclaimed Clephane, in an accent of amazed inquiry.

She turned again:

“Uncle Jack, I know what you are thinking. That does not matter either. I am not ashamed to tell you the truth—that I am sorry for Mr. Braddick and that I believe in him. I want him to go away with the cattle to-morrow, and to have a chance of doing well on the northern station—of mending his life. I don’t suppose that I shall ever see him again. You’ll be doing right if you let him go as though you guessed nothing. Ask Mollie. She is a kind true woman. I know that she will say the same.” Isabel ended in something like a sob. She hurriedly went within. Mollie was sitting in the bedroom near the window. She had heard all the conversation. Isabel halted, and cast a pleading glance at her aunt. “Oh, Mollie!” she said, “you know it would be hard if a blight were cast upon him now.”

Sympathy was welling up in Mollie Clephane’s heart. Of late days her perception had been quickened. She looked at Isabel with eyes at once reproachful and astonished, and her first anxious thought found utterance:

“He must go to-morrow; and Gustavus Blaize shall never come here again.”

She went forward, and would have kissed Isabel, but the young girl broke away with a smothered cry. She could not bear yet that the raw wound should be touched.

Mollie confided her fears to her husband, who tried to be incredulous, but was in reality horrified. A somewhat disingenuous course was resolved upon. The subject should be for the present ignored, and explanations calculated to fire emotion avoided. Braddick was to be sent off with the cattle; but at the end of the droving-trip the connection between him and Doondi should be severed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

“WHERE THE PELICAN BUILDS HER NEST.”

A STRAINED attempt at hilarity was apparent that evening among the party at the head-station.

There was no dinner served at the Bachelors’ Quarters. Braddick, Desmond, and the two extra drovers—shy, lean

youths, who had been picked up near Tieryboo—were bidden to the big house. A sort of festival was organized, speeches made, and prosperity drank to the new venture. No one, however, seemed at ease. The effort to be natural was obvious. Ferguson and Wyatt exerted themselves after their different fashions to hide an under-current of feeling, of which each was too well aware, but they were not quite successful. Clephane, anxious to appear unconcerned, found himself addressing frequent remarks to Braddick and watching for his replies with the keenness of an inquisitor. Braddick was grave and preoccupied; and Isabel kept her eyes averted from his direction, and talked nervously to Sib. It was Hester's first public appearance since her illness. The terrible blank she found could only be likened to the gap left by death. The agony was so intense that it numbed her to endurance. Her speech and actions were automatic; only when Durnford's abrupt departure came under discussion her face became so pallid that Mollie started in alarm, fearing she would faint.

It was a relief when Pat Desmond, having pledged the ladies at parting, began to recount his tender experiences on board the "Orient" steamer, which had brought him to Australia. "Sure, and when I left it I was engaged to six young ladies, Miss Gretta, and there was one I loved intensely. But she had a husband and I hadn't a cent, and so we settled to be married in heaven, supposing the husband doesn't get to the gate first and claim her before I have my chance."

Jinks protested against this statement, and amid some lively romping was borne out of the dining-room on Pat's shoulders and deposited on the roof of a vine-trellis.

Upon any other evening this might have been the signal for an adjournment to the garden, but to-night there was not the usual tendency to pair in couples; and when Mr. Blaize made the original observation that it was pleasant to be out-of-doors upon a hot night no one took any notice of it, except Aunt Judith, who tucked him up in a Shetland shawl and cradled him in the hammock.

Conversation was desultory. They talked of the west, and of the long droughts, and one of the new drovers timidly told how water might sometimes be found in hollow trees, and how men's lives had been saved by the liquid which oozed out of a spotted gum sapling. Future pros-

pects were discussed. There was suppressed excitement in the air. The tenor of life seemed about to change. Mr. Reay talked impartially of the health of the traveling cattle and of his impending election. In three weeks' time the move was to be made to Leichardt's Town, and Gretta and Isabel—for it had been settled that the two were to be companions in pleasure—would have embarked upon the gayeties of the parliamentary session. When Wyatt announced that he would visit Leichardt's Town shortly, and glanced at Gretta as he spoke, the girl's nerves tingled, and her heart rose and sunk. Life had become dramatic to Gretta. This was the ordeal by which Bertram's sincerity must be tested. She prefigured visions of Miss Baldock reigning at Government House. Poor Gretta's provincial imagination was fired. A keen foreboding pierced her, and she felt like a gamester whose future is staked upon the fall of a die.

But she had an inborn pride which steeled her, and made her manner almost cold. She determined not to yield to his mute entreaties for a *tête-à-tête*. She shrunk from the imputation of any want of dignity, and her former coquettishness seemed odious to her. She fought against his influence, which she felt to be magnetic; and, when it grew hard to resist the temptation to saunter out with him into the starlit garden, she deliberately sat down to the piano and called upon Isabel and the gentlemen to join in a part-song.

Isabel refused. She was tired, she said—she had no voice. There was some flutter and movement in the circle, and a group formed round the piano. The music was loud and uninteresting. Isabel's eyes met those of Braddick. He was standing in the window-frame, with his gaze bent earnestly upon her. It seemed to Isabel full of unutterable sadness. A feeling of restlessness came over her. They moved toward each other. He said, in a low voice:

“ Will you grant a last request, and come out into the garden with me for a little while? I may never again have the chance of talking to you.”

“ Yes,” she answered, simply; and they went out together.

He took up a woolen wrap of Mrs. Blaize's which lay on the hammock and placed it on her shoulders. The act of solicitude, the manner in which he held out his hand as she

descended the log-steps, even the commonplaces he uttered as they walked down the gravel-path toward the lagoon—all were touched by the mystery and emotion of the hour, and remained always in her memory.

“It is pleasanter listening to the music out here,” he said.

They were silent. Gretta was singing now—a bush-song, set to a plaintive air, with halting rhyme and unpoetical words, which seemed, however, appropriate to the occasion:

“The horses were ready, the rails were down,
But the riders lingered still;
One had a parting word to say,
And one his pipe to fill.
Then they mounted—one with a granted prayer,
And one with grief unguessed.
‘We are going,’ they said, as they rode away,
‘Where the pelican builds her nest.’

“They had told us of pastures wide and green,
To be sought past the sunset’s glow;
Of rifts in the range by opals lit,
And gold ’neath the river’s flow.
And thirst and hunger were banished words
When they spoke of that unknown west.
No drought they thought of, no flood they feared,
Where the pelican builds her nest.”

“‘Where the pelican builds her nest,’” repeated Braddick, softly, with the little laugh—half sad, half sarcastic—which had grown so dear to Isabel. “The golden sands, the wide green pastures, the opal mines! Ah, well! If I found them all they wouldn’t do me much good!”

“You would become rich; and then you would begin afresh, and you would be happier,” said Isabel, in a low tone.

“Money wouldn’t bring happiness if everything else were wanting,” he answered, drearily. “My life has been an utter failure; and the mistakes can’t be remedied now.”

They walked on for a minute, and presently came to the fig-tree beneath which they had been talking that afternoon; only then they had not been alone.

“Let us sit down,” said Braddick.

They did so. The lagoon was like a mirror at their feet. There was no moon to make shadows, and the stars seemed to shine deep below the water’s surface. Everything was

very still. In the silence and beauty of the night the minds of Braddick and Isabel communed wordlessly. Both were thinking that they might never be alone so again. Over both there swept a feeling of great nearness, which was strange and overwhelming, and in no sense physical. He heaved a deep sigh.

Presently she said, as simply as a child, "You are sorry that you are going away?"

"No," he replied, "I'm not sorry. It will be a relief. But, just at the time, it feels hard."

Their eyes met. He stretched out his hand impulsively, then drew it back.

"Oh, if I knew which would be the most right!" he exclaimed.

She started forward, and turned her head away. To keep silence seemed impossible.

"I think that it is always right to be open and true," she said, in a hushed manner.

He did not speak. Suddenly she felt his hand laid upon hers as it rested loosely upon her knee. The touch thrilled her through and through. She placed her other hand on his; and thus they sat like children who are parting. At last he said:

"You have been to me like a star shining in dark night. I may never see you again; but you will always be the same to me. You remember I said that you had given me back my ideal."

"You lost it—once?"

"Yes," he answered; "I once believed in a woman, I trusted and loved her with my whole heart and soul; and she deceived me!"

A spasm—half joy, half dread—shook Isabel. "Ah!" She gave a little gasp.

After a moment she added: "And then?"

"My love for her died as suddenly as if it had been strangled; and I believed no more in women till I met you."

"Ah!" she said again. There was a long silence full of meaning. He still held her hand. He did not speak or stir. He was watching her face. A light—dim, uncertain, yet still palely illumining a mystery—had broken on her. Her instinct, quickened by love, had grasped a possible clew. To reason upon it was out of the question.

No theory was in harmony with worldly facts. Yet the illogical conviction remained. If he had done evil—if he had brought disgrace upon himself and his family—it was for the sake of a woman who had betrayed him, but to whom he was loyal.

“Oh, I am glad!” she cried involuntarily.

At the same moment she gently took away her hand, and he drew a little apart from her.

“Look at me,” she said. She obeyed. The two souls met. “I love you,” he went on deliberately. “No, not one word. I say it because we are hopelessly divided. I should tell if I were dying. I should feel that you had the right to know it then. It could make no difference, and it might be a satisfaction—to us both.”

“I have the right—to know it now,” she answered slowly.

“Because,” he added, “the gulf between us is so impassable that it is like death.”

A tremor passed over Isabel. She rose from the bench, and stretched out her hands, though as she did so she retreated from him.

“Why is it impassable,” she cried, “if I believe in you? And I do—I would wait if—if you bade me.”

He got up too, and took her hands. “Dear,” he said, solemnly, “I will ask you nothing. I’ll not even ask you to believe in me. I am a dishonored man. I am living under an assumed name. I am accused of a crime. I have acknowledged myself guilty.”

“I know of what you are accused,” she exclaimed; “and I believe in you still.”

“You know it? Then Mr. Blaize has brought his charge quickly.”

“You are Robert Westmoreland; and they say that you forged your uncle’s name. Tell me that you did not do it.”

“I can not. I can tell you nothing, except this. I am Robert Westmoreland. Think the worst of me. I wish it.”

“You wish me to believe you guilty?”

“Yes. I am guilty in the matter.”

“Even if it were true—and not even your own words will convince me”—she said, her voice thrilling with emotion, “it would make no difference to me. It would

not change you from what you are. That's all I care about. A woman has intuitions about such things. She knows when a man is to be trusted; and I'd trust you with more than my life."

"That is true," he said heavily. "It would be more than your life."

He gazed at her with a kind of hungry yearning. "Do you know that years would have to pass first—that you'd have to endure poverty, disgrace, alienation from all who love you?"

"I have a little money," she faltered. "It isn't much, but it would keep me from being a burden. And I haven't many to love me. There's only my half-sister, who doesn't care much—"

A groan burst from him. "I'm guilty of the basest act in having stayed here when I knew what I felt for you. But I could as soon have thought that an angel would stoop from heaven." He raised her hands with a passionate gesture, and kissed them thrice; then gently relinquished them. "Good-bye!" he said, huskily. "You are a noble woman. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever known—beautiful in body, and heart, and soul. But I can't accept what you offer me. I'm not bad enough for that. Good-bye!"

Almost before she had guessed his intention he turned abruptly and left her. He did not go back to the house, but disappeared among the vines which sloped down to the lagoon; and presently she heard the gate which led into the paddock click behind him.

She cast herself upon the bench, and sat for a long time tearless and motionless. It was as if her heart had dried up, and she could not weep. By and by a step sounded on the pathway, and Sib asked: "Isabel, are you here?"

"Yes, Sib," she answered, mechanically.

"Gretta sent me to look for you. They are dancing, and they want you."

"I don't think that I can dance to-night," she said.

He came in front of her. Her white face startled him. "Are you really so pale, or is it the starlight? Don't you feel well?"

She rose bravely. "Yes, I'm quite well. Let us go in."

"Not if you'd rather stay here. I thought Braddick was with you."

"No; he has gone away," she rejoined, quietly.

They walked toward the house in silence. Pat Desmond had struck up a waltz. Gretta was whirling round in Wyatt's arms, and Mollie was dancing with her husband. The ghastly incongruity of the scene with her own feelings afflicted Isabel to hysterical laughter.

"We'll go and dance, Sib. Come."

The youth put his arm round her, and they took one or two turns. Suddenly she fancied that Braddick's eyes looked at her from one of the windows and vanished. "Stop," she cried, faintly; and they went into the veranda. Sib's happiness had been brief. That waltz had been to him the realization of romantic dreams in which his own being and that of Isabel had pulsed in harmonious accord. He was full of tender anxiety.

"Isabel, won't you tell me what is the matter?"

"No, Sib; I can't. It's nothing. And you are always so kind to me that you won't tease me with questions."

"I'll try not to do anything you dislike," replied the young man, with fervor. "You—you make me feel that if there was a city to be stormed, or a big thing to be done, I could do it for your sake. Isabel, you haven't forgotten your promise to me?"

"What promise, Sib?" she asked, vaguely.

"You've forgotten already!" he exclaimed, reproachfully. "You promised that you'd let me be a brother to you if you ever needed one, and that if there was anything you wanted done you'd ask me."

"And so I will, Sib," said Isabel, a little wildly. "And, if all the troubles on the face of the earth befall me, I'll come to you to help me out of them."

CHAPTER XL.

A PREMATURE EMBRACE.

THIS was the first time Gretta had ever waltzed with Wyatt. Both had in imagination anticipated the experience. Neither was disappointed. He, as might have been expected, could dance well. She, passionately fond of the exercise, glided with natural grace; and he might almost have been piloting a bird so light was she and so free of movement.

Pat's strains were inspiring; and the intoxication wrought in them both.

When the music ceased he had his wish and led her into the garden.

They paused under the orange-trees, and Gretta poised herself on the hammock, one foot touching the ground, while, with an arm upraised, she steadied herself by a little branch at which she caught. The attitude was bewitching; it displayed to advantage the rounded outlines of her girlish figure. A beam of light from the deserted dining-room fell upon her face. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes looked bright and soft. He gazed at her in silent admiration.

"You make my probation difficult," he said.

"When are you going down to Leichardt's Town?" she returned, quickly.

"In a day or two—unless you bid me remain. Only say 'stay' and business may take care of itself."

"It is business then?"

"Yes; an unexpected difficulty with lawyers about a draft upon an English bank, which should clear off the mortgage on Gundalunda."

"How rich you and Mr. Ferguson will be now! It must seem quite odd and un-Australian not to say, 'When we have cleared off the bank.' That is a phrase *I* hear often enough."

"Yes," he rejoined, lightly, "I feel rather rich. I am grateful to good seasons. Now I am in a position to make settlements, which I was not two years ago. But about Leichardt's Town. My journey could be put off for another three weeks, when you would be there."

His allusion had jarred upon her. "Oh," she exclaimed, "you dread your meeting with Miss Baldock. You are feeling your weakness."

"I admit it, if it be weakness to shrink from the ghost of a past pain, while I am still unfortified by the certainty of a present happiness."

"What difference could that make?" she said, impetuously, with a quiver in her voice. "Oh, I understand you—and I think that I despise you."

"That is a hard word," he replied, gravely.

"It is true. But I despise myself more. I, who all my life have been first with every one—not to be sure whether

I am a toy.' She rose, suddenly realizing that she had betrayed herself, and turned upon him with a gesture of passionate impatience. "I can't bear myself. You make me say things which humiliate me."

He came closer to her.

"Is there any humiliation in love? Why will you steel yourself so against me? Why will you not allow your heart free play? You call me weak! You think that I am not to be trusted! You see that I am a little afraid of the old memories which the sight of Hermione Baldock may awaken! Well! Should I be more worthy of you if I were heartless, soulless, beyond the reach of associations? I have never concealed from you that I once loved Miss Baldock. Don't you know that when a limb has been cut off the ache may be felt for a long time afterward? So with my love for her. It is dead; but there remains a ghost which you can exorcise."

He paused. Gretta kept her face averted.

"You condemn me to three months of uncertainty," he went on, "for the sake of a scruple of pride—for you love me, Gretta."

He had taken her hand. She did not withdraw it.

"If you are so certain of that," she said, falteringly, "why should you mind waiting till I am ready to own it?"

"It's because I'm not certain that I fear delay—because I know that if in Miss Baldock's presence you saw on my face a sign of emotion you would cast me off mercilessly."

"Well?" she said, with a trace of her mocking manner.

He laughed.

"I don't like to be put on my good behavior. The position affronts me. Trust me loyally and I will be loyal to you. Dearest," and his voice sounded wooingly in her ear, "you must believe that I love you. Let me speak to your father to-morrow."

Gretta looked up at him for an instant with eyes that were welling. His appeal thrilled her. He grew bold as he held her hand, and, putting his arm round her, drew her close and kissed her on the lips. She yielded herself to the wild delight of the moment and rested unresistingly in his embrace. It was the first time in her life that the lips of a lover had touched hers. Notwithstanding her coquetry, her unconventionality, her keen desire for conquest, she had always kept her admirers at her feet, as it were, and had

maintained a certain maidenly reserve, which had been to her beauty like the delicate bloom upon a flower, and upon which she had unconsciously prided herself.

Suddenly she disengaged herself from him, and stood panting and indignant.

“ You should not have done that. I gave you no right. If you had respected me—you would have waited—”

“ Oh, how mistaken you are!” he exclaimed sorrowfully; “ I thought your eyes told me that you cared for me a little. Will you not relent now, and say that you will be my wife?”

“ You are wrong,” she said, trembling in her agitation; “ leave me, if you insist upon an answer now. I can not be engaged to you. I am not sure of you—of myself. We will meet in Leichardt’s Town. Remember, that there we are to be absolutely free. You can look upon this as—as merely a bush flirtation, not to be taken seriously—till we have made up our minds.”

“ Till you have made up yours,” he said.

“ It is possible, though my experience is less wide than yours, that I too may be within reach of associations,” replied Gretta, in her perversity lashing him.

“ I see,” he replied, coldly, “ I did you injustice. You are less unsophisticated than I imagined. Among so many suitors it must naturally be difficult to choose.”

Gretta was silent.

“ I must ask your forgiveness,” he went on; “ I was carried away—by my feeling for you—by your beauty.”

“ Oh, say nothing more,” exclaimed Gretta, her tone changing; “ let it be forgotten.”

He offered her his arm. She took it, and they went back to the house. The dancing had come to an end, and the gentlemen were singing comic songs. He gravely said:

“ I await your pleasure,” and, bowing ceremoniously, left her.

Gretta stood alone for a few moments in a corner of the veranda, trying to collect herself. The tears started to her eyes. Impulse and reason were at war within her. She felt dazed, yet not incapable of analyzing her emotions.

“ I love him,” she said to herself, “ I know that I do. But there’s something which holds me back and makes me uncertain of him and of myself. It’s my pride, I suppose—and jealousy—and perhaps a want of real feeling. If I

loved him entirely I shouldn't stop to think. Oh, I wish that I wasn't so unhappy!"

Poor Gretta cried bitterly that night as she tossed about on her hot bed, now regretting that she had not nobly surrendered, now bemoaning her momentary weakness. At last, with characteristic pluck and recklessness, she determined that she would throw herself, heart and soul, into the Leichardt's Town gayeties and abide by the issues of Fate.

Next morning the cattle started, and the whole force of the station turned out to escort them for the first mile or two on their road. There was much cracking of whips and an overpowering bustle and uproar as the beasts were led out of the yards, and made to join what was called the "tailing mob," or those which had been constantly herded. After several wild gallops and furious rushings to and fro, all were at last collected into a surging, trampling, bellowing mass, which moved slowly onward, only kept from breaking by the perpetual whip-wielding of the outside fringe of drovers.

It was a typical Australian scene, and, as such, Gretta insisted that Isabel should view it from the unwalled gable-end of a corn-loft overlooking the stock-yard.

The confusion had, as yet, been too great for good-byes; and Isabel had exchanged no further word with Braddick. She saw him afar off, in the midst of the cattle, and to endure, without word or sign, the heart hunger which devoured her, was hard indeed. She sat, very still and pale, watching the maneuvers, kind Mollie shielding her from the observation of the unsympathetic. Mollie had found the opportunity to tell her that nothing had passed between Clephane and Braddick; that her husband was quite prepared to believe the Westmoreland theory a creation of Gustavus Blaize's imagination, and was, at any rate, not going to say anything which could create distrust in Braddick.

Before starting, Pat Desmond rushed up to the loft to bid the ladies an emotional farewell. Jinks howled, and Pat's eyes were not quite dry, when he bowed over Gretta's hand.

"Sure! and it's like King Comongin that I feel, banished from Doondi," he said, as he went off; "it'll be a year, barring bad luck and the blacks' spears, before I see it again. You'll have gone home, may be, Miss Gauntlett.

And you, Miss Gretta, snapped up by a Leichardt's Town swell. Never mind; there'll be Jinks left to warm the cold cockles of my heart."

At the last moment, when the cattle were almost out of sight, Braddick rode back at full gallop, got off his horse, and ran up the creaking wooden staircase.

"Mrs. Clephane," he said, advancing with outstretched hand, and looking in his bushman's dress, Isabel thought, so noble, and so manly, and so true, "my good-byes last night were curt and thankless. I have come back to tell you and Miss Reay that I have felt to my heart your kindness and trust, and that I hope I may never abuse them. Good-bye."

They shook hands.

"You have all our best wishes," said Mollie; "I am sure that you will prosper."

"Take care of yourself, Mr. Braddick," said Gretta; "we shall meet again before long. I know that you'll come back, having made your fortune, and we shall give you the heartiest welcome. Good luck to you out west."

Braddick uttered a few words of thanks, and of reciprocatory wishes. He kissed Jinks. Last of all he turned to Isabel. They looked into each other's eyes, and clasped hands; but not a word was spoken.

He went abruptly down the stairs. A minute later he had mounted his horse again. He looked up, his eyes seeking Isabel's face only. He lifted his hat in a reverential salutation, then set spurs to his horse, and ere many minutes was gone from their sight.

CHAPTER XLI.

"GOD SAVE THE QUEEN."

WITH the starting of the cattle the order of every-day life at Doondi seemed broken up.

The Head Station worked itself into a mild state of political ferment when Mr. Reay, as a minister, went again before his constituents for election; and there was some bustle of preparation and much arrangement of plans in connection with the move to Leichardt's Town. The excitement was nursed by Gretta and Isabel, who were both in a condition to require a counter irritant or an anodyne.

Hester Murgatroyd appeared to have sunk into apathy. She refused to go to Leichardt's Town, or, as was suggested, to stay with Mrs. Clephane at Tieryboo; but, though she would be there alone, insisted upon remaining at Doondi. Finally it was settled that Sib should, as far as was practicable, take up his residence at the Head Station, and that Mrs. Blaize should come over occasionally and bear her company.

So the summer party dispersed. The new minister installed himself at the capital, Mollie and her children went back to Tieryboo, and an elderly German professor succeeded Durnford as tutor.

Clephane returned, after taking his wife home, to escort the two girls to town; but the very day before that fixed for their departure the February rains began to fall. The river rose and became a yellow and tumultuous torrent, the roar of which sounded strangely in Isabel's ears. The gullies were bank and bank, Bill Stone came not with the mail, and for a month they were cut off from communication with the outer world. Gretta chafed at the delay and was inwardly wretched, while outwardly she appeared spasmodically gay. She was secretly speculating concerning Wyatt's movements. She had heard of his journey to Leichardt's Town, and knew that the floods which detained her at Doondi would offer a reasonable excuse for his absence from Gundalunda, should he desire to prolong it.

February was waning when at last they left Doondi, halting for the night at Ferguson's station on their way down.

Wyatt had not yet come back.

Gretta was too proud to ask questions. Her moods seemed fitful, but she was remorsefully gentle in her manner to James. Something in his face touched her deeply. She saw that he too had suffered. He looked wan and sad. In truth, he was heart-sick. He had been fighting his trouble, and had brought himself to believe that he must resign his love. He was glad at this time to be relieved of Wyatt's company; and would willingly have put obstacles in the way of his partner's return. He had already determined that in the event of Gretta's engagement to Wyatt he would sell his share in the station and go to England. With what a pang he reflected that he would go alone! The idea was vividly in his mind while they sat talking in the veranda after dinner; and his tone, and a tinge of hope-

lessness in his words, when he alluded casually to the future and to the possibility of his soon being far from Gundalunda, struck Gretta, and moved her to say anxiously:

“James, what is it? You are not thinking of making any change in your life, are you?”

“I don’t know, Gretta,” he answered. “There are circumstances under which it might be hard for me to stay on the Eura. But don’t talk of it now. Let us see what this year will bring forth. We decided—do you remember? that it was going to be an eventful one.”

“For me,” said Gretta. She sighed. “Yes, I remember. I said I had a presentiment that my butterfly existence was drawing to an end; and I think my presentiment is coming true.”

They did not speak for a minute, then James said:

“Gretta, will you tell me honestly, Are you engaged to Wyatt?”

“No, I am not. I will be frank. He has asked me to marry him, but I can’t make up my mind whether he cares for me with his whole heart, and whether I so care for him.”

James put his hand to his forehead.

“Ah!” he said, “you are going to try an experiment.” He went on after another pause, “If it is a failure—”

“Yes?” she asked.

“I’m afraid that isn’t likely,” he said, slowly. “Yet somehow I feel as though it couldn’t be intended that you should slip right away from me. I’ve loved you so much that it would seem a waste of all that is strongest in me if I were to be put forever outside your life.”

“You’ll never be outside my life, James,” exclaimed Gretta, impulsively. “You will always be my best friend.”

“Oh,” he said, with a sad little laugh, “I ask for bread and you give me a stone.”

“James,” said Gretta, earnestly, rising as she spoke, and nervously clasping her hands together, “don’t think me unkind, but I can’t talk to you; it makes me so miserable.”

“I shall not trouble you much in Leichardt’s Town, Gretta,” he said, rising also.

“I want to forget everything, and to let myself go,” Gretta went on with agitation; “I’m not worth thinking about, James. I’m a reed, swayed to and fro by the wind.

I don't understand myself. I only know that I am wretched."

Her voice faltered. He put out his hands in a gesture of sympathy, and gave himself a little shake, as though he would be rid of the self-pity which had made him blind to her pain.

"It's base of me to play the ill-used cur," he exclaimed. "Oh! give me credit for not being wholly selfish. I don't know what it is that troubles you, Gretta—or, perhaps, I can guess."

"No, do not guess," she interrupted.

"I only want you to feel that I'd rather be second best, as you once said, than not have any right to help and comfort you. You'll always feel, won't you, that I'm the same, and that you can surely count upon my love—no matter what happens, or how little you can give me in return? And, if you ever want me in Leichardt's Town, just write and say 'Come,' and I'll be there."

* * * * *

It was late in the afternoon when Clephane and his charges arrived at the Leichardt's Town terminus. Mr. Reay was there to meet them, a little more carefully dressed than had been his wont, and with an air of official dignity upon his countenance which struck Isabel as comical. He took them to a cab; and as they drove along pointed out with pride the office of "Works," that of "Lands," any other public edifices, which adorned the main street. The town, with its new look, its strange jumble of architecture—verandaed house, pretentious stone-buildings, shops with plate-glass windows, and wooden shanties, all mixed up together; its odd-looking vehicles—jingles of American build, bearing a family likeness to an Irish jaunting-car; colonial buggies, and an occasional bullock-cart, in contrast with hansom cabs and English carriages—all the strangeness and the incongruities of an anti-podean city—struck Isabel as the most curious place she had ever seen.

It was, however, full of life and bustle. The river winding in and out in snake-like curves was crowded with small craft. Flags floating from the observatory denoted the arrival of steamers in the bay. A great pennon hung over the Houses of Parliament—a big, zinc-roofed stone block, overlooking the public gardens on one side and the river

on the other, which was situated not far from the English, suburban-like terrace where Mr. Reay had established himself for the session.

Beyond the parliamentary buildings, in an inclosure dotted with clumps of bamboo, like gigantic Prince of Wales's feathers, lay Government House, the British standard showing imposingly above its colonnaded front. The Government House Lodge was within sight of the Reays' dwelling, and, as the cab drew up, a carriage, with an orderly behind it, came out of the iron gates and flashed by in full view of the new arrivals.

A young lady and an old gentleman were seated in it. Mr. Reay took off his hat. The lady bowed. Gretta had a vision of a pale proud face and deep dark eyes, shining from under the brim of a picturesque Rubens hat. Involuntarily she drew in her breath. It was easy to guess that this was Hermione Baldock.

“What do you think of the new mistress of Government House?” asked Mr. Reay as they entered the drawing-room.

“She is very English,” returned Gretta; “she has the stamp of fashion. I have no doubt that she looks down upon us all. Tell me about her, father.”

“I dined at Government House last night,” said Mr. Reay. “A big ministerial affair. I was thinking that my wee bush barbarian would show fair in her braw clothes even against Miss Baldock. I’m no saying that’s she’s not beautiful; and the stamp of fashion is just undeniable. She’s very pleasant, and clever at the making o’ a body.” Mr. Reay eyed his daughter affectionately. “You’re thinner, child. It seems to me that you are neither of you looking just as well as you were.”

“We are pining for amusement,” cried Gretta, with forced vivacity; “we want to plunge straight into the vortex of society. I am going to take a new departure. I mean to become worldly, brilliant, and vicious. Do you hear, father?”

“Well,” said he, slowly, “you may have your fling out. It’s what I was looking for.”

“I warn you,” continued Gretta, “that I intend to go everywhere I am asked, till I am intoxicated by draughts of dissipation. Can’t we begin to-night? Isabel is as keen as I am. We’re a pair of Bacchanalians.”

There was something dreary in the sound of Gretta's laughter; but her feverish excitement was infectious. Mr. Reay pointed to some square cards upon the mantel-shelf, which announced that a concert for the benefit of some local charity would be given at the School of Arts that evening in the presence of His Excellency the Governor, Miss Baldock, and suite. It was arranged at once that they should go; and the two girls ran off to inspect their rooms and unpack their trunks.

The School of Arts was crowded. It was a long room, with a gallery and stage at one end, and was used for public balls and charitable entertainments of this nature. Below the stage, a carpeted space had been reserved for the governor and his party. In this were several fauteuils of state, and before them, upon a small table, were laid programmes printed on white satin, and a magnificent bouquet. It was evident that the amateurs wished to render their homage to Miss Baldock.

A rush had been made for the rows of seats immediately behind the vice-regal couches; and, somewhat to Gretta's chagrin, it was found that the tickets which had been sent the Minister for Works were available only for a side block of chairs, darkened by the gallery, the occupants of which would be neither accessible nor conspicuous to those people filling the body of the hall.

But it was a good vantage-ground for observation; and Gretta eagerly scanned the room, without, however, discovering the object of her search. Presently the orchestra began to play "God save the Queen," and a little commotion followed among the audience, which stood up obstructing Gretta's view. When everybody had sat down again she saw that the space in front was occupied. There was some settling of chairs, arranging of wraps, and so forth. A tall soldierly old man, with a heavy gray mustache and an order upon his breast, surveyed the company, bowing here and there. A slender stately girl stood up and divested herself of a feather-trimmed cloak, while she nodded and smiled over the bouquet which was handed to her by one of the gentlemen. It was she whom Gretta had seen flashing by in the carriage that afternoon.

How beautiful she was! how dignified and self-possessed! with what gracious ways, and what an engaging smile! To

Gretta's fancy she resembled a lily. Her complexion was clear and pale, her features delicately cut, and her eyes large and dark. Her golden hair was drawn up from the nape of her long neck and coiled above her forehead, and she wore a quaintly fashioned robe of dull red velvet, trimmed with old lace and cut away from her throat.

And this was the woman whom Bertram Wyatt had loved!

So absorbed was Gretta that she did not at first notice three or four gentlemen in plain evening dress who stood near the governor, and were presumably the "suite."

One of these came forward as Miss Baldock seated herself, and gave her a programme, while he took the vacant place by her side. It was with difficulty that Gretta repressed a sharp cry. The blood seemed to forsake her heart, and the lights and the stage swam before her eyes. She had recognized Wyatt.

For a few minutes she sat like one stunned, her hands clinched tightly together, the music which had begun, making a meaningless sound in her ears. Then, her predominant feeling was the longing that he might not discover her presence. She shrunk further back into the shadow of the gallery. Fortunately, no one observed her agitation. Her brother-in-law sat beside her and was too much occupied in showing Isabel the local celebrities to have any attention to bestow upon her. From her position she could watch every movement of both Wyatt and Miss Baldock. They did not speak to each other while the concert was going on. Hermione sat, composed and serious; he looked dreamily at the stage. Once, at the opening notes of a song—it might have been one with which they had personal associations—they turned, as if involuntarily, and their eyes met. Gretta could not see his face, but that of Miss Baldock was bent full in her direction, and it wore an expression which Gretta, with swift intuition, interpreted to her own pain.

The interchanged glance was brief. In a moment Miss Baldock was looking down at her bouquet; and Wyatt seemed once more occupied with the performance. Gretta studied his profile. He looked tired, she thought, burdened as if with secret care; altogether more moody than he had appeared at Doondi. She told herself that he was suffering under the power of old-new influences. She felt sorry for

him, and loved and hated him at the same time. She pitied herself also; and then, like a wave, there came over her the remembrance of that last night at Doondi, when they had stood together under the orange-trees, and he had kissed her.

There was a stir in the audience when the first part of the programme was concluded. Clephane had spied Wyatt, and was making efforts to attract his attention, in the vague hope that a presentation to Miss Baldock might ensue. But Gretta besought him to moderate his transports, and declared, with a hard little laugh, that it would be unkind to disturb Mr. Wyatt, in his present exalted position, and that she wanted to give him a surprise presently.

Just then, Mr. Reay, who had a knack of introducing inappropriate subjects, leaned over, and said to his son-in-law:

“I got a letter about the cattle yesterday from Pat. They are camping at Araluen and spelling the horses. All doing well, except that five of Nash’s herd strayed and got bogged; and one of the bulls showed signs of pleuro. But that fellow Braddick hasn’t behaved well—at least I don’t think so. He exchanged billets with a pal of his at Araluen—quite as good a man, Pat tells me, and knows the country, so that we are none the worse off. Braddick has struck out west. Did you ever hear of such a fool—to throw away a good chance of getting on, and for no reason?”

“Ah!” said Clephane, with a start, and added in a tone of relief, “Well, I’m not altogether sorry. But will the new man do for the out-station?” And then followed some business talk, during which poor Isabel sat like Gretta, dumbly suffering. It seemed to her that the only link between herself and the man she loved was now broken.

The entertainment came to an end at last. The orchestra again played “God save the Queen,” and, as etiquette enjoined, no one of the fashionable herd moved till the Government House party had departed. Wyatt placed Miss Baldock’s sumptuous cloak round her shoulders, and she walked down the gang-way on her father’s arm. A neutral-tinted, dried-up looking man carried her bouquet; and Gretta found herself wondering sardonically whether his excellency was often compelled to change his *aides-de-camp* and private secretaries, or whether he took care to engage case-hardened persons.

Wyatt disappeared. The night was mild and clear, and both Gretta and Isabel welcomed the suggestion of a walk home. Captain Clephane parted with them at the door of the concert-hall, and declared his intention of strolling to the club, and seeing if he could pick up Wyatt.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE CLUB BALL.

THE next morning he announced that he had done so, and that Bertram had been greatly surprised to hear of their arrival in town and of their being present at the concert, and had said that he would call that very afternoon. Clephane further remarked that Wyatt had turned savage upon being chaffed about Miss Baldock; and Gretta had to endure some unconsciously barbed pleasantries upon the defection of her Doondi admirer.

Gretta's flirtations, however, were too much a matter of course for one so obviously the result of propinquity to be seriously regarded. Also, there was an opinion, more or less generally received in the family, that faithful James Ferguson would eventually be acknowledged as the privileged suitor.

Gretta bore herself bravely, and only Isabel suspected the hurt. No confidences were asked or given by either of the girls. Wyatt's proposed visit was not again referred to; but after luncheon Gretta suggested a long shopping-expedition and a drive in the environs of Leichardt's Town, and Isabel guessed that it was because she wished to avoid him. They did not return till late. Wyatt's cards lay upon the hall-table, side by side with a square missive which intimated that Miss Baldock would hold a reception every Thursday, and would also be at home to Mr. and Miss Reay and Miss Gauntlett upon an evening at no very distant date. Gretta went upstairs without a word. Wyatt did not pay a second visit, and two days later they heard that he had gone back to Gundalunda.

Gretta had a good deal of the Spartan, as well as a touch of the Bohemian, in her composition. In the former respect, notwithstanding her sensitiveness, Isabel resembled her, and each girl made a private contract with herself to

show a brave front to the world, to live in the present, and to extract as much consolation as was possible from the stirring life which opened before them.

The political fever ran high in Leichardt's Town. The wives and daughters of Ministerialists and Oppositionists were infected by the prevailing enthusiasm; and Gretta displayed a passion for making converts to an anti-railway policy which must have strengthened the force of her father's party. She had little time for quiet thought. The session had brought down a number of well-to-do and socially aimless squatters seeking diversion. These were delighted to drop in, out of parliamentary hours, at the house in Roper's Terrace, where the Reays were installed, and eager in concocting schemes for riding-parties, picnics, boating excursions, and small dances. The whirl was incessant; for, when other pastimes failed, there was always amusement to be found in the Ladies' Gallery, nor was the stimulant of admiration wanting. Both girls received various offers of marriage, which from their casual nature perplexed and bewildered Isabel—the range of suitors extending from wealthy senators to Civil Service clerks, and the question of settlements or suitability appearing purely secondary. In fact, the hap-hazard manner in which Leichardtstonians faced matrimony might have surprised any denizen of a colder sphere.

Gretta took these affairs coolly, and got into a way of counting her proposals on her fingers, artlessly remarking that she liked keeping the number even; and that, as, according to novels, men broke so many hearts in England, it was only fair that they should be made to suffer in the Antipodes.

Miss Baldock evinced some desire to cultivate Gretta's acquaintance; but the Australian girl held back, resenting the suggestion of patronage and always showing to disadvantage in the Government House atmosphere. Under these circumstances, Miss Baldock turned to Isabel. The two were congenial companions, and some of Isabel's pleasantest hours at that time were spent in Hermione's morning-room. She learned to know and admire the young mistress of Government House; and ere long divined that, under that delicate self-possession and fine air of agreeability, there flowed a turbulent under-current, the source of which she fancied she could trace.

It was the night of the ball given by the members of the Leichardt's Land Club in welcome of the new governor, and postponed, at his request, to the cooler season.

The club-house was admirably adapted to an occasion of this kind. It stood back from the street, screened by giant clumps of bamboos, and had a wide veranda round its sides, and a large garden stretching in its rear. No pains had been spared in the decoration of house and grounds. The trees and shrubs were hung with Chinese lanterns, and tiny lamps outlined the flower-beds. Here and there, were arches wreathed with pampas-grass and dimly lighted bowery pavilions; bananas and feathery palms gave a curious tropical aspect to the scene, and the air was filled with the perfume of gardenias and of late roses.

The ball-room—long, low, festooned with flags, and adorned with cunningly arranged devices of palm-leaves and fronds of the tree-fern—presented an attractive appearance, suggestive of anything but barbarism. The cedar boards reflected lights and moving forms. The French windows leading into the veranda and garden were framed in flowers and greenery. A fountain plashed melodiously over moss and ferns; while above the slightly elevated dais, which was banked up by azaleas and deep-hued calladiums; a floral arch had been erected, with a monogram in white roses surmounted by the arms of Leichardt's Land, and "Welcome" executed in poinsettia leaves.

The Reays were among the early arrivals. One by one, guests filed in till the rooms were quite full. At half past nine—for fashionable hours do not prevail in Australia—the band struck up the national anthem, the members of the club ranged themselves in two lines; the little travesty of a reception of royalty was played, and the governor, with his daughter on his arm, made his entrance.

Miss Baldock, in white lace, with diamonds on her head and neck, looked more than usually high-bred and beautiful. She was very gracious, and invited Gretta to sit near her. They went up together to the dais, which, by a tacit interpretation of vice-regal etiquette, was upon these occasions held sacred to the governor's party, the ministers, with their families, and the other magnates who might be present. Gretta was in the proud position of being, as it were, entitled to a *tabouret*, and was told off to a young minister for the opening quadrille. She was accustomed to

make merry with Isabel over these distinctions and the chagrin of elder ladies of whom she took precedence, but, at the same time, they added zest to her enjoyment. The upper set had formed, and Isabel, not under official obligations, had refused a disagreeable partner, and gave a start of pleasure at the sight of Ferguson advancing. He asked her for the dance. They took their places.

“I did not expect to see you here,” she said.

“We only came down this afternoon. Wyatt was with me.”

When the dance was over, as they followed in the wake of promenaders, he put questions of which Gretta was indirectly the subject. Had she been enjoying herself? Were they very gay? Was Miss Reay greatly admired? Did they see much of Miss Baldock?

Isabel spoke rather constrainedly in Hermione’s praise. There was but little to tell of Gretta, except that she was much sought after, and seemed to like the whirl. Ferguson sighed.

“She told me that she intended to make an experiment,” he said. “I thought she seemed out of spirits a little while ago. You know she complained that the bush was dull. I should be glad to know if this sort of life suits her better.”

Wyatt was standing before Gretta when they approached her. He had gone straight to her before even addressing Miss Baldock. He held her programme, and had just put his name down for a waltz.

His manner was a little embarrassed, and his eyes wandered restlessly about the room. He made some light remark upon the show of beauty and fashion, and added: “In the midst of such a brilliant assemblage, you don’t sigh for London society?”

“It would be foolish to sigh for the unattainable,” answered Gretta. She made an effort to be sprightly; but her eyes were piteous, and they fell before those of Bertram, suddenly turned upon her face.

“You see,” he said abruptly, “I have come down for this particular ball. I think you once expressed a wish that I should be here; and I am obedient.”

At that moment Ferguson came forward. His heart bounded at the light which came slowly into Gretta’s face.

"Am I too late for anything, Miss Reay, or will you give me a dance?"

"Oh, James, I am so glad to see you. Yes, of course." She took her card from Wyatt and handed it to him.

He wrote his name two lines below that filled up by Wyatt.

The music began. Captain Agar, the neutral-looking *aid-de-camp*, who was sufficiently withered to be attracted by Gretta's fresh beauty, claimed her promise.

As they were moving off, he greeted Wyatt.

"How are you? Capital ball, isn't it? Ain't those palms well done? I am getting a wrinkle for our decorations. I haven't seen you since you dined at Government House—the night we went to that squalling match. His excellency was asking after you just now."

"I'll go at once and pay my respects," said Wyatt advancing toward Miss Baldock, who was ascending the dais.

CHAPTER XLIII.

GRETTA AN EAVESDROPPER.

HE sat talking to her till it was time for him to dance with Gretta. They glided into the center of the room, not speaking; and then floated on and on, both with a dream-like sense of unreality and of giving themselves up to the illusion of the moment; both dreading the pause when conversation must be opened.

Though, in fact, they were so near, and though his material closeness and his way of holding her to him in the waltz roused in Gretta a feeling of luxurious abandonment to the fleeting joy, she knew by instinct that the spiritual distance between them had immeasurably widened during the past weeks.

Yet she tried to combat the impression; and as they moved in rhythmic harmony with the music she reasoned with herself in a dazed way. Why, because he had again been received into friendly intimacy by Miss Baldock, should it follow that he wished to renew their former relations? Was not this unembarrassed friendliness rather proof to the contrary? Perhaps he had told Hermione about her—Gretta, and that would account for the former's evident desire for cordial intercourse.

When at last they stopped, his eyes seemed to seek hers more tenderly.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

“You dance beautifully,” he returned; “better than any one I ever danced with;” and presently they whirled on again.

After it was over they went out into the veranda, which was partially closed in and dimly lighted. People were passing into the garden, and Bertram and Gretta joined the string. For a few minutes they talked commonplaces, admired the fountains, and a curious lime-light effect that made the bamboos look spectral, and cast strange gleams and shadows upon the swaying banana-leaves. Then he said without preliminary:

“You must have been surprised the night of the concert to see me with the Government House party?”

Gretta was silent.

“I met General Baldock one day quite unexpectedly, walking in the Botanical Gardens. I don’t know whether he thought that all danger was past, and that I had been cured of my folly, or that it would be better policy to affect to ignore it—”

He halted. Gretta made no comment.

“I suppose,” he went on, “that it is the duty of a governor upon entering into a new kingdom to forgive all private grudges, and there might have been some awkwardness about excluding me from his ball-list.”

“Perhaps so,” rejoined Gretta, icily.

“At any rate,” said Wyatt, “he asked me to dinner, and I went.”

There was another silence. Both were vividly conscious of a conversation at Doondi. Both felt it impossible to pronounce Miss Baldock’s name.

They walked back toward the ball-room. “Gretta,” said Wyatt with a sort of desperate energy, “you know I am at your orders. Give them to me. I will stay or not in Leichardt’s Town, as you please. I will do whatever you like. When shall I come and see you?”

She looked up at him shyly but eagerly; but his face was turned away.

“When shall I come?” he said again, yet not showing any anxiety in his tone. “To-morrow?”

"Yes," she replied, quietly. "To-morrow, if that is what you would like."

"Of course it is what I should like. I shall come to-morrow afternoon. You will be tired in the morning?"

"Yes," assented Gretta.

"Do you remember," he asked, "that we are near the end of March, and that my term of probation is expiring?"

"March is not ended yet," she answered, wondering, while she spoke, at her own calmness. "There was no term fixed; or rather, you fixed it, and I did not agree."

They had reached the door. He stopped and looked down at her steadily. He saw that her hand shook as she raised her bouquet to her face, but she would not meet his eyes. "Then," he said, "won't you put me out of my suspense and give me my answer to-night?" She hesitated before replying.

"No," she exclaimed, her calmness gone; "I will keep to my bargain. Remember we are both free."

"In honor?" he asked in a peculiar tone.

As he spoke a partner reminded Gretta that the music had begun. She moved away with the new-comer.

Ferguson's dance came after this one. Gretta talked with so much animation that he almost believed her vivacity real till he had studied her face closely and noted its look of hardness and weariness and the suspicious quiver of the muscles about her mouth. She threw herself into home topics, asking if he had been to Doondi.

"Yes," he answered, "I took Mrs. Blaize over. I thought your sister was looking very unwell."

"Poor Hester!" rejoined Gretta, lightly, "she is so odd; she insists upon moping. I am glad that Aunt Judith is with her. Well, and has anything startling happened on the Eura?"

"No one is dead or married. Gustavus Blaize has been spreading an extraordinary story about Braddick—that his real name is Westmoreland, and that he was sent out here for forgery."

"Then Mr. Braddick must be much older than he looks," said Gretta, "for it was in the days of our grandfathers that they stopped sending convicts here. I wonder that Gustavus didn't draw it a little stronger. Murder would have been much more sensational. So that's his revenge! I told Isabel she might look for it."

"Miss Gauntlet!" exclaimed Ferguson. "You don't mean that she and Braddick—"

"I don't mean anything except that Old Gold proposed to her—naturally—and of course was rejected. He took it into his head to be jealous of Mr. Braddick, who is poor enough, one would think, to be out of the category of possible admirers."

Gretta's artificial little laugh grated upon James's sensibilities. It ceased suddenly. Gretta stood still, and seemed to stiffen her frame as though she were steadyng herself. They were walking in the garden, along a sequestered path, bordered on one side by a high hedge of the magnolia shrub, that which bears a small, highly perfumed purple flower, and on the other by a trellis covered with the large-leaved granadilla. A lady and gentleman had passed, their heads barely visible above the magnolia screen. Ferguson, preoccupied, had not noticed who they were, but the glint of Miss Baldock's diamond stars attracted Gretta's attention, and she had no difficulty in recognizing the lowered profile of her companion.

"I don't like to hear you speak in that way, Gretta," he said; "it sounds as if you were mercenary."

"So I am, James. Don't you know that an Australian girl's first aim is to captivate an Englishman of rank, and to be translated to a higher sphere—failing that, to make the best of a rich squatter? You see my destiny."

"I don't believe it, Gretta. I am sure that if you really loved a man you'd stick to him, no matter how poor he might be."

"No, no, James; I should think of the higher sphere, and of all the change and amusement I might get, and I should show myself a false and hollow worldling instead of a disinterested bush-girl. After all, excitement is the thing to be sought after, if only it didn't make one so tired."

"Let us sit down," said James, pointing to a bench near them. "I like this place, it's so quiet, and I suppose I have been too long in the bush to care about excitement. The noise and glare of the ball-room seem to jar upon me."

They seated themselves.

"Do I jar upon you?" asked Gretta. "You needn't answer," she went on; "you are finding me out, like other people: you begin to see how shallow and frivolous I am."

"I see that you are not yourself, Gretta. I think that you are trying to act some sort of part, and to appear gay when you don't feel so. There's something wrong about you, dear, and your talk and laughter aren't real."

"I'm a little overdone, Jem," said Gretta leaning her head back with a gesture of weariness. "If I didn't laugh and talk continually I should collapse altogether."

"That would be better than to strain your nerves. What is the use of it?"

"Oh, I don't know, James. What is the use of anything? It seems to me often that we are like engines which make a great buzz and wear out their machinery all for nothing."

James was silent. He looked at her sorrowfully. Presently her laugh sounded again. She changed her reclining posture, and straightened herself, picking up her bouquet, which she had laid upon the seat beside her.

"How stupid I am! I remind myself of a woman in a novel I was reading the other day, who was always giving utterance to some such flat would-be *blasé* sentiment. I am as commonplace as Gustavus Blaize with his conventional forgery."

James did not know how to answer her. This mood perplexed him.

"We ought to go in," she said; "but it's such a beautiful night—so warm—like the nights at Doondi. I am engaged for this dance to a clerk in the Lands office, who waltzes very well, and who tries to be a 'masher.' Won't you congratulate me upon having learned some English fashionable slang?"

Ferguson got up. "No," he said; "it doesn't suit you. Look here," he exclaimed, in his earnest Australian way, "I want you to rest, if it's only for a quarter of an hour. I'm going in to get you a cloak, or something, and I mean you to sit here quietly, and not speak a word; I'll keep guard over you; and your partner may console himself with some one else."

"Well," she returned, "since he is only a clerk in the Lands office, and not a wealthy squatter, it's not of much consequence."

Ferguson left her. As he walked quickly down the path, the two promenaders on the other side of the magnolias passed back again. They halted close to the bench on

which Gretta sat. Had she put forth her arm she could almost have touched them through the bushes.

They were talking very earnestly, and there was a note of emotion in both voices. That of Hermione Baldock rose clear and sweet.

"I am glad that there has been this explanation between us," she was saying. "It makes the future less hard."

"Our future rests with you," replied Wyatt. "Do not let us have more mistakes."

"Ah," she said, with great sadness, "you have made an irretrievable one."

"Oh, not irretrievable!" he exclaimed. There was a brief pause. "I was mad," he went on. "It would have been impossible had I dreamed that you still cared for me."

She did not answer. The moon was obscured by a driving cloud. A large Chinese lantern, suspended from a tree overhead, flickered and went out. The darkness seemed to the poor listener like the darkness of despair. Gretta sat motionless, her teeth pressed into her lips, a faintness as of death stealing over her.

"You are the guardian of my honor," continued Bertram, in agitated accents. "It is for you to say what I must do." They seemed to have moved a little, for his voice sounded more distant. "I have told you everything; my folly, my baseness. I don't try to palliate it. Good God! What must you think of a man who could not be faithful even for one year?"

"It was—a short time," said Hermione, brokenly. "You—might have waited—a little longer." The words died away. They passed on. Gretta heard the rustle of Hermione's dress, and his deep tones as he replied, but she could not tell what he said.

Gretta rose from the bench, and stood for a few seconds dumb, with her hands pressed tight to her bosom, one over the other, as if she were crushing back a physical pain.

She sat down again, her body bent forward, her sad, indignant eyes gazing forlornly into the night. Then she broke into a bitter little laugh, which seemed something like a mocking echo; and, almost unconsciously, words fell from her. Her tone was very low and full of compressed emotion.

"That's over now," she said. "It did not last long. But, oh! it hurts!—it hurts!"

"Why did you do it?" she went on, after a minute, in the same hard whisper. "It wasn't worth while. It was cruel—it was wicked! You might have let me alone. Don't you know? Oh, I hate you!"

She staggered to her feet, and flung her arms wide, then let them fall helplessly.

"I don't care!" she said, with another ghost of a laugh. "I will not care! You shall never know how you have hurt me!"

She walked down the alley. As she got near the end of it she could hear the music of the waltz; and the clock of the Parliamentary Buildings struck midnight.

"There's a long time still," she murmured. "I mustn't go away yet. I mustn't let people see. I must dance. Oh! to laugh—to dance!"

Ferguson approached. He looked concerned at seeing her there.

"You got tired of waiting! I had to rummage in the cloak-room after all. I hope you did not mind."

He put the wrap round her shoulders. As he did so, his hand touched her bare neck.

"Gretta!" he exclaimed, "how cold you are!"

She shivered. "Yes, I'm cold; and I've changed my mind. I don't want to be quiet now. I want to get back to the lights and people—and to dance. Come."

She hurried on. At the veranda she paused.

"Jem," she said, "I have got something to say to you. Will you come to-morrow and hear it?"

"Why not now?" he asked.

"Because it is something startling—serious; and this isn't the dramatic moment. Don't look frightened. I am only going to test the sincerity of your professions."

"I am not afraid," he answered. "I have never said anything to you which I did not mean from the bottom of my heart. I will come to-morrow morning."

"Ah!" said Gretta, with her bitter little laugh, "you are more considerate, or more anxious to see me than Mr. Wyatt. He proposed the afternoon for his visit because he thought I should be tired after to-night. But come in the morning. I particularly wish to see you first."

CHAPTER XLIV.

“ SECOND BEST.”

THE house in Roper’s Terrace was very quiet during the early part of the next morning. Mr. Reay breakfasted at nine, and went as usual to his office. Isabel, who had caught a slight cold at the ball, felt no inclination to bestir herself, while Gretta, after a restless, miserable night, dozed off after sunrise, and awoke late, with a terrible sense of impending doom, unalleviated by the feverish excitement which possessed her.

When she was dressed, hearing a suspicious cough, she ran into Isabel’s room.

“ Good child!” she said, seeing that the latter was still in bed. “ There you shall stay all day. I have some news for you. The English mail signal is up, and, as you enjoy the privilege of staying in the house of a Cabinet Minister, you’ll get your letters two or three hours before the vulgar herd.”

“ Gretta!” exclaimed Isabel, “ I think you are more fit for bed than I am. You look dreadfully ill. Do go back again and rest.”

Gretta went to the looking-glass and scrutinized her pale face.

“ You are right. I am positively haggard. A sheet of white, stringy bark couldn’t look more limp and forbidding. You don’t happen to possess a rouge-pot, do you, Isabel?”

“ Oh, Gretta!” ejaculated Isabel.

“ Never mind, this will do.”

She took a crimson flower from a vase on the dressing-table, and, crushing together two or three of its petals, made a pretense of anointing her cheeks, which, from the friction, glowed now with the richest carmine.

“ You see,” she added, turning round, “ mine is a beauty easily patched up, but not calculated to stand the ravages of fatigue and emotion. It would be a pity not to look my best to-day. There’s always so much sentiment in the air after a ball, and I quite expect to see a bevy of our adorers this morning.”

Gretta fidgeted about the looking-glass as she spoke, trying the effect of a ribbon in her hair, and fastening a cluster of flowers at her neck.

"That's better. I'll come and report progress by and by. Don't be alarmed. Being a young woman of principle I'll take no mean advantages. Your claims upon the sublime Senator and the obstreperous Oppositionist shall be respected."

She was moving off.

"Don't go yet," said Isabel, with a soothing gesture; "lie down here and let us talk quietly over last night."

Gretta gave an involuntary shudder. She paused, however, and placed herself at the foot of the bed.

"I'm in an unsociable mood. My nerves are all to pieces. I want some moral champagne—a tragic scene or two for a pick-me-up."

Isabel could not help saying,

"I shall be sorry for poor Mr. Ferguson if you vent your feelings upon him."

Gretta became serious. She looked dreamily into vacancy.

"It might be as well that he should see me in my worst mood," she said; "I begin to think that I am a wicked flirt, and deserve punishment. I believe that I've rather gloated over the pangs I've inflicted upon men who were silly enough to make love to me. But you know,

"He jests at scars that never felt a wound."

"I don't believe you are so heart-whole, Gretta."

"There is a sort of equalization of things in life," exclaimed Gretta, abruptly. "When a girl deliberately sets herself to make a man care for her, and then tosses him over, she is generally paid out. That's justice, but I suppose it's always hard when the judgment comes."

At this moment the door-bell rang. Gretta started up.

"Good-bye," she said, as she left the room; "wish me well through my tragic scenes."

Gretta ran down-stairs, determinedly giving herself no time for preparations, and expecting that Destiny would meet her in the person of James Ferguson. But it was Captain Agar, the *aide-de-camp*, whom she found in the drawing-room.

He had hardly said "How d'you do?" when the bell rang again, and another visitor entered.

This was the sergeant-at-arms, an elderly exquisite, who prided himself upon the beauty of his official lappets and upon the possession of a perfect lady's hack. When Gretta appeared in the gallery of the Legislative Chamber he was wont, as he sat at the Bar of the House, to feast his eyes upon her charms till admonished by the speaker of his duties, and during the whole session he had borne the burden of an unconfessed love which now threatened to be too much for his peace.

Both gentlemen had come upon the same errand—the arrangement of a riding picnic, and a request from the one that Miss Reay would mount the incomparable steed; from the other, that the day's pleasure might wind up with one of those informal dances for which Gretta had made the house in Roper's Terrace famous.

James Ferguson dropped in upon the discussion. At his arrival Gretta's cheeks, which had paled again, became once more vivid pink. Her embarrassment was evident. She grew absent in manner, while there was a look of earnestness and of repressed anxiety upon Ferguson's face which could not be mistaken. The heart of the sergeant-at-arms sunk, and Captain Agar smiled cynically. Presently, at the suggestion of the latter, both men took their leave.

James and Gretta were left alone. Then suddenly it seemed to her that the words she had in her mind, and which a little while ago she had thought so easy, were now impossible of utterance. During the night, or rather the morning watches, she had lashed herself into a state of self-scorn, recklessness, and general defiance of fate, and had found some sort of balm for her aching heart in concocting melodramatic little scenes by which she should secure herself a position of vantage, and so assume the initiative, that neither Wyatt nor Miss Baldock should have ground for supposing that she had ever wished to involve herself in anything more serious than a flirtation.

Since her return from the ball she had not shed a tear; she would not allow herself to soften, and resolutely steeled herself against every other consideration than that of pride. She did not think of Ferguson except as a prop to which, in this crisis, she might turn for support. She had decided within herself that she would tell him the truth, and ask him to make her his wife. If he failed her she must extri-

cate herself unaided from a position that was galling to her, and definitely refuse Wyatt, before he himself claimed his liberty. But she knew that James would not fail her.

Yet as she looked at him—at his stalwart figure that was in good truth a prop against which she might lean ever so heavily in safety, at his open face, his kind eyes that she fancied were to-day more brotherly than lover-like, her mental attitude changed; her flintiness and bitterness melted, the tears rose to her eyes, and a longing came over her to be comforted and soothed. She turned to him as to something genuinely satisfying and altogether to be trusted. She hated herself for yearning toward a European cultivation, that now appeared to her tinselly; and she felt a quick keen revulsion from her former emotions, a distrust of all the brilliant, romantic un-Australian attributes, associated in her mind with her ideal hero, and with which she had vaguely credited Bertram Wyatt.

Though neither of them knew it, Gretta was at that moment spiritually nearer to James Ferguson than she had ever been in her life. She did not love him—probably she would never love him in the closest, sweetest sense, but it was the moment of reaction, and the pendulum had swung backward.

The street-door closed behind the departing visitors. Both James and Gretta were standing. As yet they had only spoken the ordinary commonplaces. Shyness and confusion seized Gretta, and that sick excited feeling at her heart became absolute pain. She knew that she was trembling. She longed to throw herself upon the sofa and let her sobs have their vent. She could not meet his questioning gaze. She turned abruptly away and went into the back room, where there was a window facing a little piece of garden. She stood before it, struggling with the gasps which threatened to rise, and looking in a dazed way upon the sun-illumined grass-plat, and at the opening purple leaves which sheathed a cluster of young bananas. James came to her side and stood for a minute or two watching her face.

“Gretta,” he said at last, “there’s something amiss with you. You thought I could help you, and that’s why you told me to come; isn’t it so? But now that I am here you don’t like to say what is in your mind?”

"Yes, James," said Gretta, slowly, with her eyes still upon the banana flower.

"I wish I could make you understand that I don't ask for anything better in the world than to serve you—no matter how. Say what it is you wish, and I'll do it if it costs me my life."

A strange little smile came over Gretta's averted face. "It won't cost you as much as that, James, though it may cost you a great deal."

"Tell me what it is," he said.

She waited a minute till she was sure of her voice. Then, turning and looking at him with wide expressive eyes, she said, quietly: "I told you that I was going to test your sincerity. You said that you'd take me under any conditions. You said too—at Doondi—that by and by you'd ask me again to marry you. I—I want you to ask me now. I want everybody to know at once—to-day."

Ferguson gave a great start. The blood rushed to his face, dyeing his forehead, and then faded, leaving him deathly pale.

"Gretta," he said, hoarsely, "don't play with me. It isn't a thing to joke about. What do you mean?"

Gretta moved from the window, making the distance between them wider. She leaned against the mantel-shelf, her head downcast, her fingers nervously interlaced; she too was very pale. She cast one distressed glance at him; but in an instant controlled herself, and said as calmly as before,

"I am not playing with you. I am in earnest."

He did not answer, and she went on tremulously,

"I know that you must think me unwomanly and horrid. It's only what I think myself. But I have this small justification. I'm taking you at your word. When you spoke to me before I wasn't sure of myself, now I am sure of myself."

He advanced toward her.

"Are you?" he asked, gravely. "I wish that I could feel so."

"Perhaps," she said, "it is you who are not certain. You see now that I am not a nice sort of girl to have anything to do with, and you've altered your mind?"

"I am not considering myself at all," he answered simply, "you know that it would be impossible for me to

change. But, if you are in earnest, it is your whole life that you are deciding, and I don't think one ought to do that on the spur of the moment; at least one should shrink a little, and weigh possibilities, before trusting one's self to an impulse."

"I don't feel afraid of not making you a good wife, James—if that is what you mean—or of not caring for you. And I can't weigh things. I must trust to my impulses. I don't think I'm a very loving girl, in one sense. I get carried away by the liking for excitement. I—I'm impressionable, but it doesn't go deep. I'm too proud to let a—a fancy get the better of me," Gretta's voice was breaking; "I must turn to the real thing at last."

Ferguson took her hand, and placed her in a chair. He himself remained standing with his back against the mantel-piece.

"Will you tell me what has changed you?" he said, gently. "I know that you will be open with me; I can help you better then."

Gretta raised her hands impetuously, then let them drop suddenly into her lap again.

"Yes," she answered, "I will tell you the truth. That is your due." She paused, and timidly glanced up at him. "Do you mind sitting near me?" she said; "I can't talk to you when you are like that—so high above me. It makes me feel as though you were looking down upon me—in a moral sense—which is natural enough," and she smiled faintly.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, shrinking involuntarily as though she had hurt him; "if that is what you feel, you understand very little of my love for you."

He took a chair close to her.

"Well?" he said, with a curious inflection of voice; "I don't think that you need tell me a great deal. I understand so much already."

"Do you remember," she said, her face turned to the window, "the talk we had at Doondi—and afterward—on my way down! I told you that I wanted to make an experiment. I have tried and it has failed."

"I know," he replied, sadly; "but it is difficult to see. You said that he had asked you to be his wife. I made up my mind when you told me that. I knew that you must

care for him, and that you would marry him if he were determined."

She colored hotly.

"He is not determined. He is sorry for what he said. It passed the time, flirting with me—that's all. Oh, it's horrible! That I should come back to you now—now that I know how true and good you are—and ask you to take pity on me. I hate myself. Jem, you've a right to despise me and to cover me with still greater shame and humiliation."

"It is a comfort to me to hear you speak in this way," said James, eagerly. "You wouldn't care about the humiliation—though there's none, that's only your fancy, Gretta—if the wound were deep." He looked at her searchingly for a minute. "I am only anxious that you should not take a leap in the dark. I am not afraid, in reality, either for you or for myself. You know I said that I was content to be your 'second-best,'" and he smiled in a mournful way. "I am vain enough to believe in my power to make you happy and win your whole love."

"You are not second-best," cried Gretta remorsefully. "You are the first—the best. Jem, I'll be frank. I did care for him; even now I am torn in two. One minute I hate him, and the next—ah! my heart is sore."

She faltered again. Ferguson's features seemed to harden, and the expression of his mouth became grim, as though he were struggling with himself. He put out his hand, not impulsively, but deliberately, and clasped hers.

"Go on, Gretta," he said, his voice sounding deeper for the contempt and indignation which were held in check. "He deceived you. He did not know his own mind—as I know mine. But he was surely not mean enough to tell you so?"

Gretta did not answer directly. She was gazing into space, her thoughts moving backward; and now she took them up brokenly.

"Jem, do you remember that night by the lagoon—the first night he was at Doondi? You talked of Italy; and of how we would go there together. Oh! let us go now—away from the Eura, and everything."

"Yes, Gretta, we will go."

"I have always been very fond of you, Jem; and that night I was very nearly promising what you wished—if his

voice hadn't broken in. It was like a spell changing everything."

Ferguson's face had softened at Gretta's reference to that evening. Now, he sighed heavily and released her hand.

"I think it was a sort of enchantment," Gretta went on; "it began then."

"He deceived you," said Ferguson, grimly.

"No, he did not deceive me," answered Gretta; "he told me that night about his engagement to Miss Baldock. All the time I seemed to know within myself that he loved her best—even when he asked me to marry him. It was that which kept me from saying 'Yes;' that, and, I think, a feeling I had about you. Last night I overheard something he said to Miss Baldock. And now, you know it all. Oh, it's no use pretending that I am not hurt. I am. I am. I can own it to you, though I'd rather die than that he should know it. But it won't last. A sickness never lasts. This is a kind of fever. I won't let myself be sick and sorry. You won't let me, James."

In her agitation Gretta rose, and stood, a lovely image with flushed cheeks, and tearful eyes lifted to his. James got up too. Notwithstanding his sorrow and perplexity a vague feeling of amusement blended in his mind with his pity and his affection. There was something so child-like in Gretta's upturned gaze, and in her appeal to him—while her wounded love and girlish pride—mingled so strangely with the determination not to be worsted—and her practical Australian mode of securing a dignified retreat from an embarrassing position—lent a touch of comedy to a somewhat pathetic situation.

He raised her hand to his lips.

"We agree then to trust each other," he said, gravely.

Never, Gretta thought, was love's compact sealed in so chivalrous a fashion.

CHAPTER XLV.

LADY HETHERINGTON'S LETTER.

GRETNA had prepared an ordeal for herself. She intended with her own lips to announce to Wyatt her engagement. This was the dramatic point upon which her imagination seized. Perhaps for that very reason it may be conjectured

that the wound was less deep than she herself believed. At any rate the nerve-bracing which her determination involved was wholesome; and she found some melancholy satisfaction in dwelling upon her scheme.

Fate, however, frustrated it. Wyatt did not call at Roper's Terrace as he had said that he would do, and later in the day it was reported that he had that morning met with an accident while driving a restive horse, had been thrown from his buggy, and was lying at the club with a severely sprained ankle.

At night he dragged himself to the smoking-room, where the members were wont to congregate after sitting at the House, and which at this time was a perfect hot-bed of gossip.

Here he heard of Gretta's engagement.

The news had spread like wild-fire. Mr. Reay, after an interview with Ferguson, had gone to the Executive, and had communicated it to his chief. The match took precedence of political business. It was discussed in the lobby of the House. The sergeant-at-arms received it with mournful dignity, and one or two new converts to anti-railwayism thought of retracting their profession of faith. The intelligence reached Government House, and penetrated to Hermione Baldock at the same time that a note was brought her from Wyatt telling her of his mishap.

On the whole it gave satisfaction—every one said that it was very suitable. Mr. Reay considered that his favorite daughter could hardly have done better. Ferguson's prospects were good. Gundalunda was clear. James would stand at the next election, and would doubtless make a figure in the House. And then, it had been for some time expected.

Isabel Gauntlet had longed all day for the arrival of the English letters. She had a curious presentiment that the mail would bring her tidings of importance, though of what nature she was at a loss to imagine. But she was in the nervous, susceptible mood when presentiments are realities not to be disputed.

Even the excitement attendant upon Gretta's announcement, and the arrival of Sib from Doondi, did not quiet her inward flutter. She dressed and went down for dinner. Sib's brown eyes met hers sympathetically. He seemed to divine her anxiety, for he said at once:

"The mail-steamer is stuck upon a mud-bank in the river, and can't get off till the tide is in. I thought you'd want to know. The letters won't be delivered till to-morrow."

Sib was not altogether cheerful. Hester was ill and moody, he said. He had left Aunt Judith with her. Clephane had received bad accounts of the traveling mob, and was anxious that he, Sib, should proceed immediately by steamer to a northern port, pick the cattle up on their way west, and assume the post of command for which young Desmond did not appear sufficiently experienced. Mr. Reay's presence at Doondi was thought desirable for the arrangement of some station matters; and it was finally settled that he should take advantage of the Easter recess, and make a flying trip to the Eura.

The English letters came the next morning. Contrary to rule, Isabel's anticipation of startling news was verified. One directed in Lady Hetherington's writing with the narrow black border denoting complimentary mourning, was handed to her. She turned red and pale as she read, and, ere she had finished, rose and hurriedly left the table. Presently Gretta followed her to her bedroom. The first knock she gave was unheeded; when she entered she found Isabel seated at the table with the letter before her, her forehead resting upon her hands.

Gretta stooped over her from behind. Isabel started and turned a face full of emotion and a kind of wondering awe, with tears beading her eyelashes, but they did not look like tears of sorrow.

"Oh, Gretta!" she exclaimed, in a bewildered way.

"What is it?" asked Gretta, anxiously. "Tell me. Has anything happened to your sister or her husband?"

"No, they are quite well," said Isabel; "it isn't about them. It's about—oh, Gretta, I don't know how to tell you—or if I ought. I don't know if it can be true—it's all so wonderful. Oh, Gretta, I'm so glad. I'm so thankful."

Gretta came round, and, leaning against the table, drew down Isabel's hands, which again supported her head.

"I see what it is. I believe that you have been deceiving us all this time, Miss Demure. You are engaged to some one in England, and they wouldn't let you marry him. And now they have relented and have written to tell you. Isn't it so?"

At Gretta's words, which in one sense were not so wide off the mark, the vivid red flamed in Isabel's cheeks, but she answered more composedly:

"No, you are wrong, Gretta. There's no one in England that I care for in that way. But this does concern some one I trusted, in spite of appearances; and I am glad —glad to know I was right, and that he deserved it."

Isabel's lips quivered; and the tears started afresh.

Gretta put her arm round the girl's waist and kissed her. There was a tinge of bitterness in her tone as she answered:

"You shouldn't be unhappy, then. It is generally the other way on when one has put faith in a man. May I not know who it is?"

Isabel did not speak for a few moments.

"No; by and by. I can not tell you anything. It's all so strange, and I haven't thought over the letter. If there has been a secret it isn't mine to make public."

"Then you shall keep it," returned Gretta. "I'll ask no questions, and will leave you with your wonderful letter. I had better relieve the anxiety of those two down-stairs, who are under the impression that you have heard of a sudden death in your family."

"There has been death," said Isabel, confusedly; "very sudden and awful. Two of my sister's friends—a Colonel Westmoreland and his wife. She died in the hunting-field."

Gretta accepted the explanation, and went down-stairs to inform her father and Sib. Isabel turned again to Lady Hetherington's letter, which ran thus:

"HEATHERLEIGH, February 13th.

"MY DEAREST ISABEL,—I have just received your letter containing the news of your safe arrival in Australia, and your first impressions of bush life, which I must say seems to me very rough and 'free-and-easy,' and not a good training-school for young ladies, charming though you describe Miss Reay to be. I am rejoiced to hear that you like Jack's wife; but, interesting as all your accounts are, I must defer comment upon them till my mind is in a more collected state. At present I have barely recovered from the shock of a most terrible occurrence. I mean the sudden deaths of Colonel and Mrs. Westmoreland, hers having taken place here, and his at Glen Wold a few days later, both under pe-

culiarly distressing circumstances. Richard and I have been so upset by the sad event that he has arranged with Colonel Slingsby to hunt the hounds for a short time, while we go to the Irvines, and then to the Suffolk Gauntletts, where I hope he may come in for the end of the covert shooting.

"I will give you all the details of the Westmoreland tragedy, which, as you are so far away, can not fail to interest you. Poor Colonel Westmoreland had been almost a stranger to us of late years. He and his first wife were, at one time, my dearest friends, but after her death I saw little of him, and his second marriage was naturally somewhat repugnant to my feelings.

"I think it took place before you came to us, and I dare say if you heard the story—not caring for the persons concerned, it probably made but a slight impression upon you. But now, the particulars are of melancholy significance. She—poor woman! one does not wish to speak hardly of the dead—was quite a low-born person—a sort of companion to the first Mrs. Westmoreland, very handsome, but, I fear, always very unprincipled. She was at one time engaged to Robert Westmoreland, the nephew, who was accused of having forged his uncle's name, and was disinherited and banished in consequence. People say that Colonel Westmoreland was in love with the girl—Miss Gryce—during his wife's life, but this I am very unwilling to believe. Certainly he was very much opposed to her engagement with his nephew, as well as being bitter and relentless toward the latter in the affair of the forgery; and he married her barely a year after he became a widower. I visited the present Mrs. Westmoreland, for I did not wish to make a complete breach with my old friend, and I knew nothing against her moral character. You may, perhaps, remember their spending a few days at Heatherleigh some years ago, when you were in the school-room. They went abroad soon after that, and only returned to England just before, or just after, you sailed—I don't recollect which. We invited them for our shooting-party the last week in January, and they came. I was horrified to see how very much he had aged; and his almost senile devotion to her was quite painful to witness. She seemed fond of him; but I can not say that I was any more favorably impressed by her than when I met her after her marriage. I thought her a hard, hand-

some, worldly woman, uninterested in parish matters and ordinary country pursuits; and quite unfitted for the duties, if not the pleasures, of her position. She had an artificial manner, fascinating to gentlemen, and seemed to crave for excitement—going out with the shooters, playing billiards, and apparently never being happy unless she were amused or distracted.

“ On the third day of their visit the hounds met at Assherton. Both she and Colonel Westmoreland intended to follow, and had brought over their own horses. Mercifully, Richard was spared the responsibility of mounting her. That very morning, however, Colonel Westmoreland was called to London on business, and she went out without him. It was a lovely day, and, as Assherton is such a pretty meet, I took Lady Brooke and one of the other ladies in the wagonette, meaning to see as much as one could on wheels. We soon lost the hounds, and spent our morning driving aimlessly along lanes. We had just made up our minds to go home when there was a rumor among the stragglers of an accident, and one of our grooms galloped up to tell us that Mrs. Westmoreland had been thrown from her horse and killed, and that they had carried her into Dobito’s farm. We drove straight there, and found Richard, Colonel Slingsby, and several others—all looking utterly unnerved. She was not dead, but the case was hopeless. They had got a doctor, who was with her then. The spine was injured, and she could only live an hour or two. Some one went off to telegraph for Colonel Westmoreland; but, of course, even if the telegram had reached him at once at his club, he could not have come in time.

“ She was in the parlor, laid on a sort of bed they had arranged. I went in and took Lady Brooke, who, I thought, might be a comfort; and we sent for Mr. Dyke, the new clergyman at Assherton. She was quite conscious, and when Lady Brooke told her—for I could not—that she was dying, took it quietly. All she said was, ‘ I can’t feel my limbs, and I suppose that my back is broken.’ She asked how long she might expect to live, and then lay still for a little while. We begged her to tell us if there were anything she wished done, or any message delivered to her husband. She shook her head and would not speak; but we could see that she was in great trouble of mind. When

Mr. Dyke came, she took no notice of him. He knelt by her and prayed extemporaneously. It was most solemn and affecting. Presently she said, 'I want to see a magistrate.'

"Richard and Colonel Slingsby both came in, and we asked if she would like to be alone with either of them. Richard said that he would write down anything she desired, and leave it to her husband to carry out her wishes. She said, 'No;' that she had a confession to make of a crime she had committed, for which an innocent person had suffered, and that we must all hear it; for she feared that if only her husband knew, he might, out of love for her, keep the secret, which would be unjust to the person who had been wrongfully accused. She said that she was glad her husband was not present, and would not know how bad she was till after her death; for though she had not deserved his love she was deeply grateful for it, and had tried to be a true and affectionate wife. Then, as we all stood round, she made a deposition, which Richard took down, to the effect that it was she who, as Miss Gryce, had forged Colonel Westmoreland's signature, and not his nephew Robert; that she had done it to get money to buy off a man who knew things in her past life which he threatened to tell the Westmorelands, and which would have lost her their esteem. She had made the check payable to Robert Westmoreland or bearer, and had got Robert's servant to cash it for her. When the forgery came out a few months later and Robert was accused, he—knowing her to be the guilty person and unable to clear himself except by denouncing her—had submitted to the disgrace and to his uncle's conditions that he should leave England. I believe that he went to Australia. How strange, yet how unlikely, if you should ever meet him there!"

"There are some points of mystery about the affair which I don't suppose will ever be cleared up. No one is likely to learn now what were the unfortunate woman's antecedents or true motives—whether she really loved Robert, or whether, in view of the first Mrs. Westmoreland's death, she had always aimed at a marriage with Colonel Westmoreland. At the time the forgery was found out her engagement with Robert was at an end, and Mrs. Westmoreland had just died, but there had been no reconciliation between uncle and nephew. It is supposed that she calcul-

lated upon this to avoid discovery. Robert was careless and extravagant; Colonel Westmoreland, when his nephew was in favor, profusely generous, so that, where many irregular payments were made, a check not at once accounted for might have passed without being closely inquired into. One feels that there may have been more under the surface than one has a right to take for granted, and that jealousy was probably at the root of Colonel Westmoreland's anger against his nephew in the first instance and of his implacable attitude in regard to the forgery.

"Mrs. Westmoreland died soon after making her confession. She passed away calmly, and we must hope that this act of reparation brought her some peace at last.

"We carried her back to Heatherleigh. By the time Colonel Westmoreland arrived, all that we could do for her had been done. I never saw a man so completely stunned by grief. At first he seemed hardly to realize what had happened, and went about almost like a walking statue, giving orders mechanically. She was taken to Heatherleigh and buried in the family vault. Richard and I went over for the funeral, and stayed, not liking to leave Colonel Westmoreland. He had as yet asked few questions about his wife's last hours, and those Richard had evaded; but when he insisted upon full particulars it was no longer possible to shirk the terrible duty, and Richard put into his hands the sealed envelope containing Mrs. Westmoreland's dying confession, and left him alone.

"We waited in great anxiety, for we knew that the blow would be more fearful than that of her death. He shut himself up in the library, refusing to see any one except his lawyer, for whom he sent. When the lawyer had gone, he gave orders that no one should disturb him. We dared not intrude. There was a light in the window all night. The next morning, when we knocked repeatedly, no answer came. The door was burst open, and he was found in his arm-chair dead. He had taken a dose of poison.

"Richard brought me home, and then went back for the inquest, when of course everything became public. Colonel Westmoreland had made a fresh will, a few hours before his death, leaving all his property to Robert, and giving instructions that agents should at once proceed to Australia in search of him."

The vital interest of the letter ended here.

For a long time Isabel sat with it before her, almost overwhelmed by the greatness of her joy. A sort of ecstasy seized her, of love, of faith in God, who had so wonderfully unraveled the tangled skein, of belief in the higher capabilities of man. She had so trusted her hero. Deep in her heart there had lain such utter love for him, yet so hopeless that its realization seemed further than Heaven; and now he was proved more heroic than even she had dreamed; and the world, which had doubted and maligned him, must bow before a height of loyalty, of chivalrous self-sacrifice, to which not one man in ten thousand could have risen.

She fancied that between the lines of the letter she could read the whole tragic story, his passionate love, his betrayed faith, the bitterness of his position toward his uncle, his disgust at life, and disbelief in goodness, which had made him almost welcome exile. As if by instinct she realized the fierce emotions by which he had been tortured during his first years in Australia, the deadness of existence when the flames had burned themselves out, the mood in which he had arrived at Doondi. She thought so much of him that at first she was hardly moved by the catastrophe of which she had been reading. She could not shed any sympathetic tears over the fate of that miserable woman or of the broken-hearted old man she had deceived. Isabel turned with a shudder from the dark side of the picture to the brighter prospect of Braddick—she could only think of him by that name—cleared, no longer doomed to a life of hardship in Australia, but free to return to England, honored, rich. And then a girlish scruple arose. He would be rich, and if she sent for him—if through her he learned the good news—might he not think that it was for his money and his position that she cared? She laughed softly to herself. No; he knew her better than that. He knew that had he willed it she would have been content to share his poverty and disgrace. Now he would come to her, and the storm and the darkness were over, and she had learned indeed that “Love is faith.”

She lost herself in a girl’s hazy, delicious dream of happy union. A maid’s entrance aroused her, and, bearing her precious letter, she went shyly down-stairs, lingering on

her way. She felt afraid to face the world, which to-day was so different from what it had been yesterday.

The house seemed very silent. Mr. Reay was gone to his office, and restless Gretta, nowhere visible, was doubtless with Ferguson receiving or escaping congratulations. Isabel thought, with bosom gently heaving, that ere long she too might be accepting congratulations. She sighed while she smiled, for Gretta's manner was strange and Isabel feared she was not happy.

Practical considerations asserted themselves. Oh, that thought could bridge space! Braddick was far away; he had left the Doondi cattle. His whereabouts was unknown. "Out west" conveyed to Isabel the idea of a trackless desert whither letters and newspapers never found their way. It might be months before the late Colonel Westmoreland's agent discovered him—before he heard the news of his good fortune. She longed that the tidings should reach him through herself; but how?

She was pondering upon impossible schemes, wondering if she could persuade her uncle Clephane to go in search of Braddick, wondering if there were telegraph lines out west, wondering whether she dare intrust Pat Desmond with so delicate a mission.

The sudden entrance of Sib startled her, and like a flash brought the solution of her difficulty. She rose, and in a tremble of excitement put her sister's letter in his hand. "Read it, Sib, and then you will see," she exclaimed. "You said that you would help me, and I promised to ask you if the time ever came. Read that, and you will see."

Sib took the letter, and she waited while he read, forgetting in her agitation that to him the names of Braddick and Westmoreland would have no connection. He was a long time going over it, and when he had finished turned again to the first sheet, then gazed at her in bewilderment.

"I don't quite make it out," he said slowly; "it seems a rum start; and that fellow was a splendid chap to bear all that for a woman's sake."

"It was splendid, Sib," said Isabel with eyes beaming; "it was like a hero."

"But," Sib went on, in a hesitating way, "I don't see what it has to do with your promise or mine."

Isabel looked at Sib, a new expression in her eyes. For the moment she forgot herself and Braddick. Something

in his face roused a vague fear. He looked strange—anxious.

“Sib,” she said, “I know Robert Westmoreland.”

Sib did not answer.

“You know him too. He was at Doondi. He is—Mr. Braddick.”

Involuntarily each turned from the other. The little tremor, the softening of Isabel’s voice as she pronounced Braddick’s name, the wave of color that rose even to her brow, told Sib everything. His face, too, was betraying. He turned very pale: his lips locked grimly, and his lank arms gave a nervous twitch. Without uttering a word he walked into the back part of the room, and stood before the window, as Gretta had done the day before, his eyes fixed upon the swaying banana-leaves.

“It’s no good,” he muttered to himself; “I’ve been a green idiot.”

The silence was a revelation to Isabel. She nearly laughed at first; and then she could have cried. Poor Sib! Kindly rough Sib! She did not know how to convey to him her distress—how to retract her impulsive appeal.

“Sib,” she said, “you are not angry with me?”

He turned, and took her hands in his, holding them very tight.

“Angry! What for? I was taken aback for a minute. That’s all.” He tried to speak cheerily, but his voice faltered.

“Sib,” Isabel continued, plaintively, “I wouldn’t have shown you the letter if I hadn’t remembered, all of a sudden, when you came in, that you were going north—and I remembered, too, what you told me—”

“That I’d ride overland as far as Cape York to serve you, Isabel. And I’ll do it now, if he is not to be got at any nearer.”

“Oh, Sib! But he has left the cattle.”

“I know. It won’t be much of a job, though, to find him, and give him this letter. That’s what you want?”

“Oh, Sib!” cried Isabel again, “I thought perhaps Uncle Jack—or telegraphing—”

“There isn’t any telegraph line beyond Curramilla,” put in Sib.

“You see, no one knows that he is Robert Westmoreland, for certain, except myself. Mr. Gustavus Blaize sus-

pected it and told Uncle Jack. And I feel as though this were his secret, and I had no right to tell it to any one," said Isabel, in her palpitating anxiety taking up her thoughts confusedly, "except to you, Sib, for you are so good, and I trust you."

Sib clasped her hands to tightly that the pressure almost made her wince. "I'm going to be no end of a brother to you," he said, with his nervous Australian laugh. "That's all I'm good for."

"Sib, you are good for everything; you are the best and kindest of brothers."

"I'll bring him back," said Sib, "and, till he comes, no one shall know anything about it but you and I. I'll start by the steamer on Tuesday, Isabel."

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE END OF LANCE MURGATROYD.

AT this time one of Hester's saddest, and yet tenderest, consolations, lay in her frequent visits to the cave above the river, which was consecrated to the memory of her lost love. She would sit there for hours, living again in imagination through long summer afternoons of feverish delight, mentally reviewing scenes and episodes in the past, and all the dear fervid words, and the caresses which had been so perilously sweet. Then she would tell herself that, had they been less human, had they held their ideal sacred, as in the early time, the love-friendship, untainted by grosser passion, might have remained to them both, a precious possession. Woman-like, she would analyze the position, and question herself upon the causes of failure, the whys and wherefores of the catastrophe and separation. Must the ideal and the actual be always in deadly opposition —soul-love an impossibility—because of the clinging of passionate body, full of throbbing desire, which made perfect union, or wrench asunder the only alternatives? "We loved each other, we were happy for a little while; but it did not last." It is such a short story, so common that almost every man and woman might tell it, and yet it is an epitome of the most imperious wants, the keenest woes, of humanity! "Nothing lasts in life," thought poor Hes-

ter, in her bitterness, "except the mistakes; and they go on forever."

Many a battle with her instincts of right did she fight in that lonely cave. Many times was she tempted to write the line which should recall Durnford and challenge Fate. She loved him. She belonged to him. Her heart echoed his own daring cry—

" And hath not love like mine the right to break
The whole world's laws in sunder for thy sake?
The right to claim thee, own thee before all?
There is no truth in heaven, no truth in song,
No truth in God, if this sweet thing be wrong."

With the sense of his presence, of his haunting eyes, of his embracing arms, so vivid as to be at times almost maddening, duty became a worn-out phrase and wifehood a mere name without meaning. Then as she looked down upon the little knoll and the child's grave and remembered her husband in hiding among the rocks, remembered the coarse home-truths he had uttered and the revulsion of feeling they had produced, the influences which upon that memorable occasion had overborne her love, operated anew and held her from committing herself irrevocably.

She was returning at dusk one day from her solitary expedition—it was the very day upon which Isabel had received her letter from England—when the sight of two horsemen carrying arms, and accompanied by a black boy, whom she recognized as their own Combo, startled her, and caused her to quicken her steps. She was walking by the river, just where the blacks' camp used to be—it had been moved since King Comongin's banishment—and they were coming from the Head Station. After crossing, they turned in the opposite direction to her own, and were almost out of sight when she reached the bank. A vague fear smote her that the men, although they were in plain clothes, belonged to the police force; and, if so, what could be their object? Was it possible that they had gained an inkling of Murgatroyd's place of refuge; or were they merely in search of some suspicious character lurking on the borders? Many such passed both by Doondi and Tieryboo, and Captain Clephane's office as magistrate was no sinecure.

There were very few people on the Head Station just

now. Sib was in Leichardt's Town, and only the tutor and the boys occupied the Bachelors' Quarters. In the house Mrs. Blaize kept Hester company.

The old lady came fluttering down the steps as Hester approached the court-yard. She had a tin of Indian corn in her hand, and was scattering it among the chickens which surrounded the dairy, while at the same time, she impressed the eighth commandment upon two pickaninnies whom she had caught plundering a hen's nest.

"Baal you take eggs. Suppose you take eggs, debbil, debbil cobbon coola along a you," she was saying—but broke short at sight of her niece.

"Dear heart, Hester!" she cried; "what do you think has happened? Macnab has been here with a trooper—and there's a whole camp of them down the river."

Hester turned very white. She came hurriedly forward, and, putting her arm within that of Mrs. Blaize, turned her back toward the house.

"I saw them," she said, slowly, "crossing the river."

Aunt Judith seated herself upon the edge of the veranda. "My dear," she said, "I feel just as if I were back at Oreti Downs, and the place under siege by the blacks. Only it's worse than blacks this time. It's bushrangers. We might have been bailed up any day."

Hester's heart gave a wild bound. For a minute or more she did not speak. An unnatural excitement seized her—a sense of almost exultation which was horrible. The earth seemed to reel. She burst into a fit of hysterical laughter.

"Indeed, and I assure you that I'm perfectly serious," said Mrs. Blaize. "What do you think, now, of Captain Rainbow being hidden from the police—up in a cave at the back of Comongin?"

"Who told you this?" asked Hester, in a low quick tone.

"Macnab himself. They caught one of the band who stuck up a shepherd on Gin-Gin, and he turned evidence against his captain."

"What did they come here for, then?" asked Hester, still speaking rapidly, and in that repressed voice which was a shield to her agitation. "Have they made him a prisoner? Aunt Judith, tell me everything."

Mrs. Blaize looked up, and was startled by the expression of Hester's face.

"Dear heart!" said she; "there's nothing to be nervous

about now, Hester; though, if you had known it when you were out picnicking— Just to think of Isabel Gauntlett, fresh out from England, and so near a nest of bushrangers!"

"Oh, what does that matter?" cried Hester, fiercely. "Have they found Captain Rainbow?"

"I expect they'll have found him by this time to-morrow," said Mrs. Blaize. "They know that he is close to Comongin water-fall; but the man who informed could not tell them the exact spot. They came here for a black boy who knew the country; and they took Combo."

"Combo will not go beyond the water-fall," exclaimed Hester, breathlessly, as if to herself. "He is afraid of Puyume." She paced the gravel-path twice, halting opposite Mrs. Blaize. "It's not moonlight, now," she said abruptly.

"What are you thinking of, Hester? Oh, they won't go there to-night. I expect they'll camp at the foot of the range."

The dressing-bell rang; Mrs. Blaize got up, shaking her curls ruefully. "It's horrible to think of a poor creature's camp being sneaked unawares to him, and a sinner brought out to judgment. They say he shot a man in Gippsland, and he is certain to be hanged."

Hester went to her room, and dressed herself for dinner, smoothing her hair, and arranging the little cap to which she had lately taken, with more care than was usual to her. Outwardly she was quite calm. Only when she looked in the glass, something she saw in her face seemed to shock her; for she started back, and flung herself on the foot of the bed, her body crouched, her eyes staring wildly into space.

"He is certain to be hanged!" she said aloud; "and I shall be free."

She got up again, and walked the little room with frenzied steps like a caged tigress. She paused before her writing-table. There was a photograph of Durnford upon it—a rough thing taken at Wyeroo. Catching it up she pressed it passionately to her lips. "Oh, my love! my love!" she cried. Then she walked again, her eyes fixed on vacancy. "I can't do anything," she said, in a hard whisper. "I would have saved him. God knows that! God knows I don't want to be bad!"

The second bell rang. She went to the other wing, and

they all sat down to their evening meal. The German tutor and the boys were there, and the talk as was natural, ran upon the police and upon Captain Rainbow. Hester said scarcely a word. She sat like one dazed. Mrs. Blaize made a poor pretense of eating, constantly putting down her knife and fork and giving vent to a deep sigh. "My heart is full of that poor sinner," said she. "I'm a big sinner myself, I suppose, for I am just foolish over the erring and the unfortunate. And to think that, if I'd had my way and been the mother of a brawling roistering set of brats, one of them might have turned bushranger and got hanged."

Hester leaned suddenly forward. "Joe," she said, "how long does it take for the bark to grow on a tree that has been blazed?"

The boy looked at her in surprise. "My word, Hester, you are a shingle short! What has that got to do with Captain Rainbow?"

"Never mind. How long?"

"Depends on the sort of tree! Iron bark never grows. You wouldn't notice a bottle-tree after a month or two. There! I believe you are thinking of our blazed track through the scrub. Oh! Hester, what a lark if we had spotted Combo's cave, and stalked Captain Rainbow!"

Hester rose from the table. She went out into the garden. There was no moon, but the sky was clear, and the stars shone brightly. The outline of Mount Comongin was as distinct as though it were day. She could fancy herself released from the trammels of flesh, hovering, a white-winged messenger of warning, over the rock-encircled dell where the doomed man lay.

All the evening she moved restlessly between the lagoon and the orange-trees. No one could have guessed at the tumult within her. It was as though fiends were tearing her—as though her soul were the stake for which her impulses were warring. Joe at the piano was strumming waltzes which sounded like the mocking merriment of imps. Then Billy, the black boy, came in to speak to Mark about getting up horses for the morrow, and something was said about Brunette, Gretta's mare, which was to be penned in the stock-yard that night in readiness to be shod the first thing in the morning, Hester heard the colloquy; and, somehow, the fact that Brunette, fleetest and surest-footed

of the horses at Doondi, would be in the yard that night, impressed itself upon her brain as of the utmost importance. She heard the black boy's "Good-night, Massa Mark, mine sit down along a camp. Mine murra make haste to-morrow morning." Then there was a little fuss as to the hour of breakfast, and the tutor and the boys went back to the Bachelors' Quarters.

Hester re-entered the sitting-room where Aunt Judith had lighted the candles. The old lady kissed her with unwonted tenderness, and mentally reproached herself for having, by her compassionate interest in Captain Rainbow, reawakened in Hester's mind memories of her unfortunate husband—also a transgressor against the laws. But it never occurred to simple Aunt Judith that Lance Murgatroyd and Captain Rainbow were one and the same.

"Such is life, waiting, waiting!" she murmured, though it was not directly evident to what she referred. "Go and lay yourself down," the kind soul went on. "And may the dear Lord give thee sweet sleep. Say your prayers, my child, and put in a word for the forsaken sinners. For love and pity are our mission; and it's bad for the man when he hasn't a woman to put up a petition for him. That's against nature and religion, for, if self is man's weakness, unselfishness should be woman's strength."

The lights were out at the Head Station except a solitary candle in Hester's chamber. Across the river the native dog howled eerily, and the night-birds wailed at intervals; but in the house and the Bachelors' Quarters there was silence.

It was midnight. Hester's light was extinguished. A French window opened very softly, and she herself stepped forth from the veranda into the garden. She was dressed in her habit and wore a black hat which shaded her face; a veil was tied round it beneath her chin, and in her hand she carried an unlighted candle and matches. She stood still for a moment with her face uplifted to heaven. The starlight showed how pale it was, but the eyes were clear and the lips steadfast.

With Judith Blaize's injunction ringing in her ears she had gone to her room, and kneeling by her bedside, after she was undressed, had begun in a mechanical way to say her prayers.

She had repeated the Lord's Prayer coldly, hardly. There

had been a long pause. She kneeled with her head buried in her hands, silent, stony, hopeless. After a while her thoughts instinctively reverted to the formula of her childhood; and, as so often happens in the case of a woman passing through an emotional crisis, the unconscious touching of some simple spring in memory let loose a flood of associations, and all the tenderest sympathies of her womanhood welled up and softened her flinty mood. Remembrances of her dead mother and of her dead child swept over her. She thought of the homely code of love and duty which her mother had practiced in her hard Australian life. She thought of how she in her turn had guarded her child's cradle with aspirations after clean, wholesome, honest living; how she had snatched the little thing from possibility of contamination; how, afterward, the woman in her coming uppermost, she had trained the baby lips to say, even when the hearing wrung her heart, "God bless little Maggie's father and make him good."

She repeated the words aloud. "God bless little Maggie's father, and make him good."

Pure and evil angels fought within her. She gave a smothered cry, and her body writhed under a storm of deep-drawn sobs. The revulsion was terrible. It was a long time before she grew calm. Then, her resolve was taken. A sort of ecstasy of self-sacrifice possessed her. Her frame thrilled. She felt drawn by an irresistible power. She would yield herself to its guidance. She would save her child's father.

She rose and dressed herself again, putting on her habit, then she went out into the court-yard. Going toward the middle wing she entered Mr. Reay's office. She lighted her candle, and, after searching in a remote receptacle for the key, opened a safe where the station-ledgers lay, and where cash taken from travelers for stores was kept. There was never much, as money was always sent at once to Leichardt's Town; but to-night Fate seemed propitious, for that very day four five-pound notes had been paid in for horses bought on an emergency by a passer-by.

Hester stuffed the notes into the breast of her habit; then, relocking the safe, she blew out her light and went forth, just stopping to take down a lady's spur which hung in the passage.

She walked rapidly toward the stock-yard, pausing at a

little back humpey close to the milking-yard, usually occupied by the two black boys, Combo and Billy, and Maafu.

The calves whinnied in their pen as she approached, and an unhappy mother in the paddock beyond set up an answering call. Hester pushed open the door of the hut, and let in the starlight upon the sleepers, who, wrapped in their blankets, were stretched on the earthen floor. Maafu, distinguishable by his tow-colored mop of hair, lay with his back to her nearest the wall. Heavy and phlegmatic, he made no sound or movement as the door creaked on its hinges; but Billy, alert as quick-silver, was sitting up in a moment, and ejaculated: "Hester! Budgery you!" "Baal woolla," said Hester. "Baal Maafu pidney!" She drew back, motioning him toward her. With the agility of a cat Billy leaped noiselessly out of the hut, and closed the door upon the unconscious Maafu. Hester led him to the stock-yard, and, speaking in the aboriginal dialect, bade him put a side-saddle upon Brunette, then bring out Hector—a thorough-bred which was always kept stabled, mount the latter animal himself, and escort her to the back of Little Comongin.

Silent obedience is not an aboriginal virtue. Billy stared aghast, and demanded reasons for this wild night excursion. Hester asked him if he knew where Combo had gone:

"I believe that fellow go with policeman, look out mandowie along a Captain Rainbow," returned Billy.

Then Hester briefly explained that Captain Rainbow was a brother belonging to her; that the policemen were going to sneak his camp in the morning, and take him to jail; that she knew where "that fellow sit down"—in a cave close to Comongin waterfall, where they had all picnicked on New-year's-day; that she meant to ride there that night, with Billy to show her the track, and warn Captain Rainbow, so that he might run away before the police and Combo could find his hiding-place.

Billy's eyes sparkled in the starlight. The out-witting of black or white is a feat which commends itself to the native cunning and love of mischief. In a twinkling he comprehended the situation. "Budgery you sar"—which is the blacks' equivalent to "I will do what I can"—said he emphatically, below his breath. He stole into the stable and saddled Hector; then coaxed Brunette out of the yard, and, ere many minutes, they were both mounted and can-

tering across the flat to the river. Soon they were out of hearing of the Head Station. Their way lay between the river and the scrub, Comongin looming always ahead. On this flat ground they were able to proceed at a rapid pace; but even here the track was encumbered with broken timber, and the plains covered with the long-bladed grass ridged with paddymelon holes, so that the utmost circumspection was needed. Thus, Hester's senses on the alert, and her strained nerves, did not permit her thoughts to travel beyond her immediate goal.

Her pulses quivered with excitement. The night air played upon her face. The labyrinth of trees, some white-barked and spectral, the outlines of scrub and mountains, the strange sensation of moving on through some unreal landscape, made her feel as though she were dreaming vividly.

Billy rode ahead, his spirits finding vent in a wild corroboree air which he chanted in subdued tones, now and then breaking out in a mysterious but expressive ejaculation or a warning "Look out, sar," to Hester when some fallen log or unexpected gully threatened danger.

The horses were fresh, and Brunette needed no touch of spur. Except for the dingoes' howls and the tramp of the horses' feet and rustle of grass and leaves as they brushed by, the silence was profound. In the hour after midnight curlews had ceased wailing, and the day-birds would not awaken yet. Now the flat country narrowed, the track disappeared, and they were mounting the ridges, among uncouth spiked grass-trees, naked red-gums, and sparse wattle.

They could only crawl. The horses trod warily, and Hester recollected that Brunette was unshod.

The need to spare her horse lulled memory, which had begun to sting anew, as some features of the country recalled the New-year's expedition, the rapture, the shame, and agony which had been crowded into it.

They were nearing the scrub. The stars became hidden by trees overhead. They seemed groping their way in darkness, and they scarcely dared speak. Every now and then Billy's glistening eyes would turn back upon her, and he would raise his arm warningly, for it was just here that they suspected the police of camping for the night.

No trace however was to be seen, and they moved on cautiously and with greater difficulty, Brunette wincing at

every step. Oh, the interminable length of that passage through the scrub! What they could have ridden in an hour in daylight took three hours now. The horses stumbled over stones and dangerous pitfalls. Creepers caught at Hester's habit and tore her hands. Twice she shrieked outright as something cold touched her cheek—it was only a cluster of berries, but the gloom seemed full of horrors and of uncanny reptiles. When they got out of the scrub the dawn had broken, the birds and insects were awake, the soft, dewy haze made nature beautiful, and they could see close the scarred precipice of Comongin, but the ravine was still three miles distant, and Brunette was dead lame.

The mare turned back beseeching eyes as Hester spurred her onward. "Oh, Brunette," cried the wretched woman aloud in her desperation, "it's life or death! Go on! go on!" every sound she heard behind was, she fancied, the tread of the troopers' horses; but when they came at last to the edge of the ravine, within sight of the little cleared spot where they had left their horses upon the previous occasion, Hester uttered one whispering cry, and Billy turned as though he had been shot; not till they had gained the shelter of a belt of brigalow did they dare to raise their breathing. Both had seen the remains of a camp-fire and two horses hobbled in the clearing, and they knew that the troopers were before them.

The crisis was too momentous for conference or for sign of despair. Hester leaped down. With her own hands she snatched the hobbles from Billy's saddle and put them round the mare's legs. They tied the two horses securely to gum-trees; then Hester seized the shrinking black and led him forward, wildly crying that she would "pialla" the Great Spirit, so that no evil should befall him. Like a mad thing she sprung down the steep descent, clinging to rocks and saplings, while Billy, more agile than she, swung himself before, and many a time saved her from a perilous fall.

Now they were in the bed of the ravine, the booming water-fall, swelled by late rains, had turned the trickling stream into a foaming torrent. Not for an instant did Hester pause. She made for the spot where the current seemed weaker and the foam indicated a less depth, and plunged bravely in. She had lifted her habit to her waist. The force of the water almost bore her down, but she was only

wetted to her knees; and, breasting the stream sideways, she reached the opposite side, and clambered up the shelving bank which dropped down from the dense scrub beyond.

She looked for the black boy. He had not followed; she saw him crouching against the rocks opposite, and she knew that she must depend upon herself.

She took out her compass, and stood for a minute trying to take her bearings and to recollect the exact spot at which she and Durnford had branched off. Guiding herself to the best of her ability, she pierced the gloomy maze, searching her memory for landmarks, and fancying every here and there that she perceived the trace of blazing upon some of the trees. She wandered on, losing the clews, finding them again—again astray. Hours or minutes might have passed. She could not tell. As she approached a clearing, she saw in agony that the sun's rays were making a bright net-work upon the ground.

Oh, God! Here were new blaze-marks; and here, upon a bottle-tree—the bark unhealed—that old trace of Durnford's tomahawk! And here again, above, a new bleeding wound—

Suddenly a shot echoed through the scrub—another—one more! Then silence. Hester flew; she heard the faint sound of voices and of a scuffle. The wall of rock was before her. As she reached the entrance to the dell, the sounds seemed to cease. Obeying the uncontrollable influence which impelled her, she rushed through the narrow opening! Close to the precipice where she and Durnford had sat a group of men stood. They seemed to be bending over a prostrate form.

Hester's cry, which rose like that of a wounded animal, made them start aside and turn in consternation and horror toward the woman—breathless, haggard, with hat thrown back from her pale face and frenzied eyes, with torn, soddened garments and bleeding hands—who appeared as it were miraculously in their midst.

No one spoke; but Lance Murgatroyd—the blood welling from his breast—raised himself and half stretched out his arm. He knew her.

She flung herself upon the ground by his side. "Lance!" she cried, "I heard last night—and I rode through the

bush. I could not be a wicked woman. I wanted to save you—and it's too late!"

A strange smile came over Murgatroyd's face, refining its coarseness and illumining his glazed eyes fixed upon her with an expression of tenderness and joy.

"You wanted to save me!" he repeated; and his tones, deep and sweet, and reckless as she remembered them, thrilled her nerves again. "You didn't go after all with that chap? Good, old girl!" His voice broke. "I knew you'd run straight. And this is a good job over—"

"I did it myself," he said to her after a pause. "They sneaked the camp, or it 'ud have been a fair fight. I wasn't in the cave—I could have held that. I said I'd never die a dog's death while I'd a revolver and a charge left. It's a good job for you, Hester. But I'm glad—I'm glad, old girl, that you ran straight."

Does the "first-best" ever fall to the lot of human beings? As Ferguson's wife, Gretta sometimes asks herself the question. Perhaps so also do others of the personages in this story. There must always be shadows and blurred outlines. Dreams of romance can never be realized in absolute brightness and perfection. Nevertheless, Gretta is happy, and she can hear of the devotion to each other of Wyatt and Hermione without a pang. Bertram married his old love, and they remained in Leichardt's Land, while James Ferguson and Gretta were in Europe, and till ill health obliged General Baldock to resign his post. Upon the return of his partner, Bertram Wyatt sold out of Gundalunda, and he and Hermione are now living in England. But Gretta's lines are cast in Australia.

THE END.

GLOSSARY OF AUSTRALIAN NATIVE WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS.

<i>Baäl</i>	No
<i>Budgery</i>	Yes, good
<i>Bong</i>	Dead
<i>Cobbon</i>	Big, plenty
<i>Cobra</i>	Head
<i>Cóolà</i>	Angry
<i>Daloopil</i>	Pistol
<i>Euroka</i>	Sun
<i>Lubra</i>	Young blackwoman
<i>Marra</i>	Take
<i>Murra</i>	Much
<i>Mumkull</i>	Kill
<i>Myall</i>	Wild
<i>Mandowie</i>	Feet
<i>Look out mandowie</i>	To track
<i>Nangry</i>	To camp, stay
<i>Pialla</i>	To tell
<i>Pidney</i>	Know, understand
<i>Woolla</i>	To speak
<i>Waddy</i>	Stick
<i>Yohi</i>	Yes
<i>Yan</i>	Go away.

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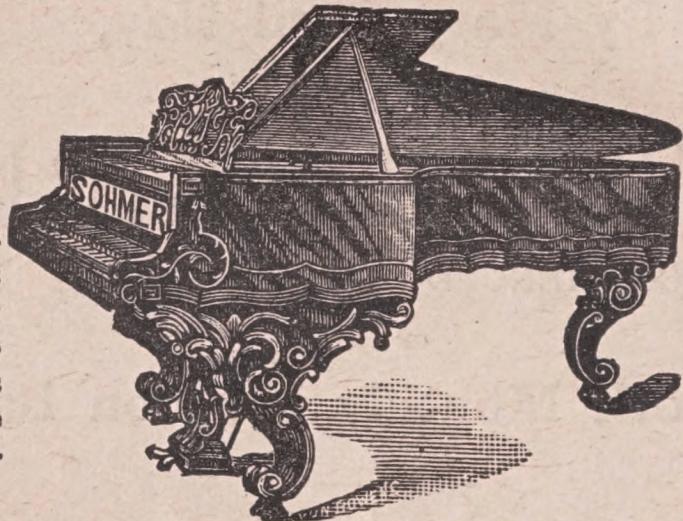
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